

A History of Magic

Story: A History of Magic

Storylink: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/6964876/1/>

Category: Puella Magi Madoka Magica/魔法少女まどか★マギカ

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Last updated: 04/12/2012

Status: Complete

Content: Chapter 1 to 16 of 16 chapters

Source: FanFiction.net

Summary: The stories of Magical Girls throughout history who contracted with Kyubey, and their fates. Inspired by Kyubey's history lesson in ep 11.
FINAL

CHAPTER Homura goes on until the end

***Chapter 1*: Joan**

A/N: Maho Shoujo Madoka Magica is copyright to Gen, Shaft, etc. Joan of Arc is principally drawn from Mark Twain's Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc , an excellent book on an amazing character

Lorraine, France, 1420's

Along with her many friends, Joan had often played under the ancient beech in the woods. Now she came there alone, with a bruised ear.

The white cat was lying in the tree. It scuttled to a spreading branch near Joan's face and spoke into her head. Its voice was less beautiful than God's, but just as clear.

– *Joan! I'm here to grant your wish, if you'll fight evil as a Puella Magi–*

"Forgive me, but what are you? I know the fairies lived by this tree. But Pere Fronte drove them away, calling them kin to the fiend."

– *Well, I don't know why I should be–*

A glassy red lens met Joan's dark eyes. Behind her light voice, the cat sensed a mind like a six-inch nail.

"Will you say Our Father with me? No evil creature can abide holy words."

The cat mildly recited the Lord's Prayer, observing Joan's cheeks flush and eyes brighten.

"...deliver us from evil. Amen. So you are a fairy. I'm sorry for being untrusting, but glad you've just heard about God's power and goodness!"

– *I'm not sure what a fairy could do with that... –*

"God gives all his creatures their purpose, in His love." Joan smiled joyfully,

but then clouded over. "Purpose...I wish the Holy Saints would appear to Mama, and to His Majesty the Dauphin, and tell them my purpose direct. I wish the English would all charge off into the sea, sometimes. I wish I was sure of God's will...but I know the one who speaks to me is Him! Do you think I need anything more, my fairy?"

– *Your country is ravaged, but you still speak of such a benovelent creator– the one reason I can't discount the concept is you, Joan. And I do know that everything does have a purpose. We all have a choice no one else should make for us–*

"So you believe I'm proud, as well as Mama?" Joan tickled the white cat's chin,

"I argue with my brothers. My back aches from work. I enjoy watching the sun set. I *am* an ordinary girl."

– *Do ordinary girls hear the voice of God?* –

"Maybe they just need to listen. The path He shows is always best, even when humans and fairies don't know. Please be patient and give the village children safe dreams!"

The cat watched her run off, and settled to wait.

The last time Joan came to the beech tree, she was panting with something deeper than effort. The cat watched her, without concern.

"The English...everyone got away, so they just stole and burnt what we couldn't carry. Even the church...I don't know, but I cannot believe God wants me to tarry in fear."

– *No. Not if you're going to be a Puella Magi who frees a country*–

Overcome by her heart's own fire, Joan knelt smiling in the moss among the trees.

"I told you, fairy. I'm an ordinary handmaiden of God. My wish is for France to

hear Him through me, and free *herself*."

Something surged from Joan's body as she dropped into the pool by her side.

Spluttering, she made out the white cat rising into the sky above her, around a shining red stone she knew was hers.

It was at the height of breakthrough, after months of travelling and pleading her way to the feet of the king, that Joan met her first witch. A sense she distinguished carefully as from the white cat rather than God drew her to an abandoned church, which unreasonably became a forest of stained and half-living flesh. A drunken chant roared in her ears, with words in at least four languages.

"Blessed Mary," Joan prayed, "Is this English witchcraft?"

– *It wasn't English, but a Witch is what we call it*– The white cat trotted from behind a giant pulsating knee, – *They're born from curses and grief; you'll appreciate that the war makes for rather a lot of both. Killing these things is the price of your wish. The duty of a Puella Magi.* –

"No. The privilege of God's handmaiden."

A sword appeared in Joan's hand as she spoke; her clothes were armour, the red stone flashed on her breast. As a studded, headless figure with a fleshy maw over its belly emerged from the horror, a halo blazed round Joan like a torch and her mouth made a decisive line.

The task took more blows than Joan expected, but her aura of justice paralysed the poor mad creature's resistance. As the Witch's Maze dissolved, Joan stalked out of the church, where her brothers who followed her to the Court were waiting. She tried neither to flinch nor preen as they stared at her armour and weapon.

"I found them. God guided me." The halo had gone, but her brothers still looked at her like a piece of a legend.

"My liege, this woman speaks with the voice of Beelzebub! A peasant girl could never capture the hearts of so many knights and lords without selling her soul!"

The Dauphin wriggled on his throne, muttering about an inquiry. Head bowed towards the Bishop who was accusing her, Joan was grateful she did not need to look him in the eye. Her friends and comrades protested fervently;

"None of us are godlier than Joan!"

"Let her prove her mission in battle without more talk–"

"Let her prove herself here!" The Bishop snapped, "No possessing spirit could abide the holy confession, or swear to the Apostle's creed!"

– *As you judge, so you will be judged*– The white cat quipped in Joan's head,

– *It's as hard for women as for cats, it seems*–

"I believe in one God. The Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth..."

Joan's voice almost trembled with love for God, who had brought her small life glory. She served him without demons—relief broke into her voice as well. Her supporters glared at the bishop plainly, who stared darkly back. Joan rose, and smiled at him.

"I am not who you say I am, my lord. Nothing lives in me but the Lord's Spirit. I promise he still has wonders to show us all."

Joan knew better than to use Witch-fighting powers in her battles, bitter in their deaths, but more glorious in their victories. The great number of Witches haunting siege-ravaged Orleans and the Loire valley expended enough of her magic anyway. For whatever reason, Joan noted her red stone growing cloudier by the day.

Within miles of Paris she dictated heartfelt letters. The Dauphin had to send more troops. By God's will, the Burgundian collaborators should join their countrymen. But reinforcement never came, and her last battle was against Burgundians.

It was a frustrated raid that met impossible resistance. Unhorsed and wounded, Joan saw an axeman swing towards her eldest brother. She cut the man in half with a simple blow; as blood poured over her boots, she blinked. More soldiers were pounding towards both of them.

"Lead everyone from the battle, Pierre. I will be last to follow."

"No, we'll cover for you! You have to escape—you're Joan of Arc."

"Don't be a fool, Pierre! You're my brother. You must protect my friends. All of our lives belong to the Lord!" Joan turned from Pierre, unable to face

his spellbound eyes. With strength to crush monsters, she chopped through one man, then another.

The red stone finally grew almost black—a clear voice told Joan that one more use of her powers would invite a terrible ending. Armour and sword dissolving away, she stared around herself at the heads and arms and blood.

"I'm sorry. It was all... I never...I never wanted..."

The men who finally took her prisoner said nothing about the field of bodies, as men often do about things they fail to understand.

The trial was wearisome, and fearful as the worst battle. In subtle variations, she was accused again of unnatural acts, demonism and witchcraft. By inspiration or unintimidated sense, Joan turned aside every question. Even in her confessions, to a French priest who passed her words to the court, she said nothing of the white cat. As the weeks of fetid prisons grew to months, it was only for the future of France that Joan could keep her story together.

The night after her sentencing, the white cat finally appeared in Joan's cell, apparently neither saddened or satisfied.

"You're here then—now listen. I know our Lord's voice would have left me already, if the weight of blood I have shed was not for His purpose. Whatever you are, you made me a promise."

— If you had wished to save France in person, this would never have happened, Joan. Your people will certainly free themselves, in a generation or two.

They've even put up a fortune to ransom you with but the Dauphin simply refuses to pay. You're nothing but an embarrassment to his rule, as a witch.

Your comrades aren't planning any kind of rescue either—

Joan looked up at the prison stones, black and wet. France would be free, but she was rejected. God's messenger cast out by a people sold to the devil.

Or a damned soul expelled from the kingdom of God. A pitiful witch, fighting and dying far from childhood's leaf-stained sunlight. France would be free. She had her wish. But she had nothing.

"If I have sinned....if I have sold my soul and my country...then I am nothing. I just pray for my people's sake, that God's will might conquer the devil's lies..."

– *You chose your own wish, Joan. The people of France chose just as freely.*

This fate wasn't God's wish or the devil's. Only yours—

"No! No! Then all is nothing, everything useless!"

– *Oh, your use as a Puella Magi only begins now, Joan. Examine your heart, and I think you'll see what I mean—*

Brush tail flicking, the cat vanished from the window. Joan stared into the wall, as if smothering her own soul between the stones. Finally, she clasped her hands.

"Father, have mercy on me, father forgive my sin. Father, send me to the fire alone—my God, let me last out the night and die. Or bitterness will become a curse, and I will live as a Witch. Everyone in this wretched world will burn."

***Chapter 2*: Cleopatra**

Alex andria, Egypt, year 53 BC

Rather than echo Shakespeare's description of the Pharaohs' overburdened riches, it may be said that the scene was Cleopatra's palace. As yet a teenaged princess rather than the last Pharaoh, she reclined behind carved walls and heavy curtains, with a white cat in the crook of her arm.

"Well, child of Bast...what manner of wish would you grant the future queen of Egypt? The Nile floods and the Sun rises at the queen's command, or didn't you know?"

– I can hardly disprove that, your highness. But Pharaohs have been doing all that since Cheops. The question isn't what can I give, Cleopatra Philopater.

It's what you want–

Her laugh as she squeezed the white creature was as deep and languorous as expected. But her brightness was irreplicable as diamonds in a cave. It was a sweet vision of life; rather than feeding on the opulence of gold thread and jewels around her rooms, it seemed to create it.

"You're a sharp creature. Mmmm..." She turned her head to the attendant kneeling beside her, a beautiful young girl darker than the Greek-descended princess. She was the only attendant Cleopatra had confided the cat's offer to–

indeed the only one the cat itself would address. "What would you wish for yourself, Charmian? Riches? A perfect husband? To rule as queen yourself?"

"You jest, my lady. I could never be royal in my nature, and as for luxuries, or men, I'm quite content. If anything, I would wish your wish for you, my lady. I could fight monsters in your place, and you could freely rule."

– It would be possible–

"Be silence! Must not a queen bear a queen's hardships?" Plucking a bunch of grapes from a table, Cleopatra lapsed into silence. In time, Charmian spoke

softly,

"My lady. If you would wish as a queen, for your country...you could ask that Egypt's people will serve a Pharaoh as great as you'll be, forever."

In the scorpion-haunted night the pyramids loomed beside the Nile, severe in their defiance. Walking alone, Cleopatra studied them, without sombreness.

Deep thoughts only quickened the life of her eyes and face.

"I have...immortal longings in me. Alike to the dreams that built *them*; tombs for the rulers of the gods' own country since the ages of the gods. But eternity is in the flesh, not in stone—without love, I will be neither a queen or a goddess. I would wish...that any man I chose would love me, more than life itself." Her voice had grown coy, almost humble. "Can that be a queen's wish?"

— *it is a Puella Magi's wish, as always*—

The white cat leapt above Cleopatra, as she fell back into the grit and dust. Her yellow soul gem was not the largest it had seen, but the brightest for a thousand years.

"Goodness," Charmian commented, when her mistress told her, "Would you have every man in the world fight for your love in the streets? No king who ever lived could rule so firm."

"As queen, my strength will be poured out, to preserve Egypt and her glory. I do not mean to use this power more than once, for myself."

"My lady...it is your wish." Cleopatra laid a comforting hand on her attendant's lowered head, expression unreachable.

Nine years later

After civil war, invasion and intrigue, Cleopatra was Egypt's undisputed Pharaoh. She had spent two years in Rome, then fled from the chaos that had

followed Julius Caesar's death. The white cat appeared on an olive tree in the palace gardens, as if he knew Charmian was looking for him.

— *How disrespectful!* — It observed, dodging the stone she threw, — *You're not even afraid of me?* —

"Less than I feel hate. All those years, my lady fought for her life. Her precious skin was torn to falling with wounds...I saw more horrors in her

eyes than *Duat* could ever hold, and all she asked for was a man to love her. And now he's dead, for his blood-soaked empire and destiny—"Constant as the northern star"

et-bloody-cetera! He was going to give it all up for her, all the politics and blood. Live by the Nile with my Queen. But he left. Your magic betrayed her."

— *I promise you, Caesar loved Cleopatra, if that was her wish. More than life itself, those were the terms. It just seems that his empire mattered more to him than even that—* The cat shivered to recall Caesar's mind, nearer the glass-steel soul of an Incubator than any human it could recall, — *Anyway, you said she loved him. Does love mean binding a man to your side with magic? —*

Charmion fell on her bare knees in the dust, rubbing it into her hair like a funeral mourner. Drawing closer, the cat smelt a lot of wine on her breath.

"No...no, it is...no...gods. It's just men and women, just love! Why does she torture herself for a single man?"

— *You're human. If you don't understand it, it's no good asking me—*

Wandering out into the city, desolate, Charmian felt only dull surprise when the torches around her vanished, and the darkness ahead became a tunnel.

Something nipped at her legs. A cat with a spiteful child's face yowled at her, and she heard a swarm of pattering feet. Charmian had loved and revered cats as much as any Egyptian, until then. Now two yellow fires had blazed up in the darkness above her, and a mouth was stretching open beneath them.

— *Quick! Become a *Peuella Magi* or you'll die! You could fight at your queen's side, and share her burden. It doesn't matter what you wish for—*

"I won't be another of your pawns." Charmian threw her head back, and shut her eyes, "I am Cleopatra's servant. The wish of her heart is mine."

Something flashed above the Witch's boat sized head, and one bright eye burst under a brighter arrow. Decaying breath washed over Charmian with the monster's roar as a shower of arrows dispatched the minor familiars, and an arm around her waist bore her to safety. She heard the Witch's paws thumping down in the darkness; saw her queen leap and spin above it, raining arrows down from her gold-chased bow. Within minutes, a final burst had ended it. Cleopatra dropped down and stood, scale armour rippling over her slim, quick body. For a moment, Charmian saw the weariness she knew her queen bore. Then Cleopatra extended an arm and embraced Charmian without holding back.

"Praise Isis, I could save you! I'm so glad."

Eventually, Cleopatra asked the cause of Charmian's sadness. Unable to lie, the attendant reclined beside her queen and expressed her feelings on Caesar and the white cat's contract in mollified terms.

"Darling, how could you take on so much? It is the burden of Queens to treat with great empires and to love great men..." Her hand stroked Charmian's arm, lingering, "The great thing is that Caesar named me queen of my own country.

The Roman's will not cast Egypt down like Gaul or Carthage; the line of Pharaohs will not end. I would give my soul for such a victory, over again."

"And Ceasar, your highness?" Charmian stared at Cleopatra's moving hand, as if hypnotised, "You mean he wasn't really the one...?"

"Charmian!" Cleopatra avoided her eyes, and sighed, "He *was* over fifty."

A year later

The Egyptian girl had a simple white robe and a spear; she could barely look into Cleopatra eyes, but made a fierce effort.

"Egypt's fate rest on my life, little Puella Magi. Leave the country by sunset, or you will die if I must kill you myself. I am the Pharaoh."

"Do you tell the Witches that? You may say you're the goddess Isis reborn, but I know what happens to girls who don't find Grief Seeds. None of us are even human anyway. Did you know that? Our souls are trapped in these gems. That body of yours might as well be mummified already!"

"A soul, a soul," Cleopatra shook her head impatiently, "My soul is where I eat, where I touch and where I see my face in a mirror, little girl. Go. Live what small life you can, and find the end that fits you best."

Fifteen years later

Legionaries tramped down Alexandria's streets, around the palace. From above a door, the white cat listened. Mark Antony had been defeated by soon-to-be Caesar Augustus; his lover Cleopatra had been imprisoned in her own mausoleum. Egypt would become a Roman colony. He hopped down, and trotted to the mausoleum, where Charmian was kneeling at Cleopatra's feet.

"Your highness, couldn't you...make Augustus love you? He's more like Caesar than Antony..."

"Yet I loved both Caesar and Antony." Cleopatra's tears ran over her smile, "I know Antony had faults with his greatness. I have my own, but my purpose that endured has gone with him. My life has been sold for men, Charmian...now I can only do what is right for a queen. I'm sorry."

"My lady!" Charmian's tears dropped over Cleopatra's sandals, "You are a queen. What you do is right. To follow you...has been a life of sweetness."

Cleopatra dropped to her knees beside her, and both women clung together in silence. Iras, Charmian's fellow attendant, came in with a covered, hissing basket.

The white cat looked down at the three bodies. He observed that Cleopatra still

moved and groaned,

– Cleo, you've lived longer than any Peueella Magi in history–by driving out every Egyptian girl I Contracted with, as a matter of fact. You should know you can't kill yourself that easily! –

Raising herself in agony, as the poison ate at her magically toughened body, Cleopatra glanced at Charmian's peaceful face.

"With Antony gone, I have no more royalty than this poor girl. She followed me. I can only follow her."

– What about revenge? Antony's enemies could die in torment–you only have to choose it. You can live as a Witch, devastate Rome. The things you've done will have a meaning! –

"And you say now their meaning was revenge? I listened to you, and dreamed that a queen could find true love, little demon. Will you not say why you have snared my soul and body?"

– We're in the same job as you, really, Cleo– the white cat stared with plain and merciless blandness – We ensure that the sun stays lit, and the sea doesn't dry up. That's the reason you have to suffer–

With fading strength, Cleopatra drew her soul gem from her breast, and squeezed.

– You'll gain nothing by dying. Everything you've suffered in your life will be useless! –

"None of you understood me. Not my Caesar, or my Antony; not the wide world or my own children. The only one who knew my heart was her."

– Is that right? I understood you well enough to get a contract. And I can sense your hate for Augustus. You've lived by your feelings more than even a common human. I can't understand why you won't turn them lose! –

Cleopatra's smile, before she crushed the gem and died, was as near to a Goddess' as any she'd ever made.

"I will not be understood by you. And the day will come when you will envy us."

A/N: Cleopatra, Antony and even Charmian and Iras are drawn from Antony and Cleopatra by Shakespeare. The idea of Julius Caesar considering retirement in Egypt with Cleo rather than trying to become dictator of Rome mainly comes from George Bernard Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra. Duat is the Egyptian underworld, Bast is the goddess of cats.

***Chapter 3*: Cassandra and Penthesilea City-state of Troy (Modern Anatolia): 1184 BC**

The Princess woke in her chair. The palace still burnt before her eyes. She no longer slept in her bedroom, with its balcony overlooking the forums and towers of Troy, but the screaming reached her everywhere. Agony, brief. Fear, down to the last hours of killing. Regret.

Cassandra closed her darkened eyes and tried to remember silence.

"Princess? I'm coming in." Coroebus, her fiancé, entered the marble sitting room with food, "The king asked me to bring you something. He's just formally accepted the Greek peace envoys. Their army is drawing back from the walls. The city might be holding its breath."

"As if all Troy know their own future," Cassandra whispered. "But none dare to say the king has ass's ears. Leave me. You'd be mad to stay and hear a woman's madness."

"Cassandra, you can't be mad. You always had the wisest, brightest mind I knew—you would enthrall philosophers I could barely talk with. But there was the war, your brother Hector's death...I know you only speak from your suffering, Cassandra. I just wish I could take you out of this city."

Fingers twitching, Cassandra turned from Coroebus's honest, moonstruck face.

"Stupid. I could never leave Troy. You must believe me."

"I...I know you wouldn't lie. But your father will meet the Greeks, whatever I say. If he doesn't make peace, now...without Hector, Troy will fall before spring..."

" *I know!* I see it—I can't change it! I only asked that you believe—If Greeks envoys enter our city, she will burn by nightfall. Heroes have died in heaps around Troy, but you're the one who can save me now. Say you believe me.

Three words."

"Cassandra...no man abuses flags of truce, not even Greeks—their honor would die for all time. Your visions...they seem a curse that shows only death..."

"I see the future. Or did I sell myself for nothing?" Cassandra glared like a devil, but wept into her hands. Coroebus touched her shoulder.

"Whatever happens, I'll fight for you. I know I can die—"

"So that's your nature, then. Fight, die and call yourself a hero! Any man with sword could do the same."

Coroebus stumbled out, past the guard posted to stop king Priam's eldest daughter making another public scene. Cassandra wished she could do anything to make him hate her. Then the vision of Coroebus hacked down in Athena's temple might disappear. A renowned hero of Greece beginning to rape his fiancé might not be his final sight.

Cassandra felt her arms shaking, harder than in any Witch-hunt. She wondered if telling Coroebus her last vision would've shocked him into belief. It hardly mattered; she could never have told the poor boy such a loathsome thing.

By evening, Cassandra heard singing from the streets. Ten years of war was ending. All Troy celebrated with wine and hung up wreaths, excepting her.

Even her guard had left. She passed from the room, and threw herself into the railing of a balcony. Flashes of bright clothes and discarded armour rose

up from the white streets, with laughter and the dying moans of the future. Hair streaming like a flag of death, she called out;

"The Greek envoys will open the city gates! *Listen!* Your houses will burn, your wives will be slaves! I warned you? Do *you* say I'm mad? Your daughter is twelve and you'll see her die on a spear tonight!

"In a thousand years, they'll talk of a wooden horse, and call you immortal fools! In a thousand billion years, light will die to entropy...everyone will die, without hope..."

Cassandra almost pitched herself over the railing, before a mental voice implored her to be rational. It was the White Cat.

"I know they won't listen." She muttered "But to show them the future, this all I can do."

– *You could kill the Greek envoys before they admit their army?*–

"The dogs were invited as my father's guests. Troy may die, but Trojan honour will not..."

– *Don't jump! You want revenge? I can give you Achilles*–

Cassandra stepped back from the railing.

– *I made a Contract with his mother, Thestis. She wanted the strongest, most handsome son in the world. With one weakness, in case it became better that he should die*–

Greeks massed before the open gates like ants overrunning a nest of fire, the fighting in the Gate itself unthinkably desperate. High above, Achilles was half way up the gates of Troy, when the arrow struck through his leg. Pulling up with one hand, his pace barely slackened. Within minutes, he crawled over the parapet, blonde mane lank, and slumped down, unable to rise

"Was it enough, mother?" The hero gasped scornfully, "Was I finally worth all you did for me?" Two smooth, bare feet came down before him, "Gods. What did I do to deserve being killed by some witch?"

"By Hemlock, actually. You should last long enough for a chat." As a Puella Magi, Cassandra wore a shift that concealed more by glow than materiality, held with a red Soulgem clasp. Red flowers were woven down her hair and a bow was in her hand. "You abused my brother's body—he was better than me, but

that 's not all. You're going to die down there because of Penthesilea, queen of the Amazons."

"That was a fair fight. The fairest..."

"She was, wasn't she? And the strongest woman warrior. That was the wish she asked for from the white cat. We fought together—without her, I could never have fought."

Achilles tried to crawl away. Cassandra stamped on his wound, and continued over the groans;

"She wasn't bad—only reckless and too passionate. She killed her sister by mistake in a leadership challenge. So she left Scythia, and came to Troy. I first saw her from above these very gates. Hair pouring over brown shoulders, as she shook it out from her helmet. I knew that moment, she had never learnt to sew or make conversation. She could live off the land for a month, dress a wound in raging battle. Urge a young warrior to courage...and she rode as if her horse had wings. By Apollo, she could ride."

"So, I killed her," Achilles broke Cassandra's silence, "And she meant more to you than Hector? Well, she *was* beautiful."

Cassandra turned back to Achilles. Eyes darkened with anguish burned.

"The life in her was beautiful, Achilles. You only loved her when she was quiet and dead."

"You can't judge me. Humans cannot judge an Achilles! You know nothing of what battle does to men—"

"And what do you know about women? You violated my best friend before her body was cold, and threw her in a river. You act like a god, but you're a sociopath who violated boys and corpses!"

Cassandra stared at Achilles' eyes, as the light left them. Then she looked across her city to the towers lit by rising flames.

She could fight, and Troy would still fall, She could become a Witch; her malice would disappear in the night's uncountable tragedies. Her life, as always, was as meaningless as a candle at noonday.

"Stay with me a while, Penthesilea," She prayed, "Coroebus will be there. I can't leave him."

The only place with even illusory safety was Athena's temple. The Trojans who had rejoiced that evening carpeted the street without deference to age or rank. Cassandra's long legs flashed over the bodies. Discarding the bow, she drew a dagger, praying to Apollo for some way to change her own destiny, in the little time she had left.

Soldiers were crowded before the temple. Defenders were hurling roof-tiles and no one had dared to set a fire, but an assault would clearly be made within minutes. She didn't need her gift to know that women would seek refuge inside, and that Coroebus would look for her here.

Leaping over the bronze ranks, Cassandra slashed a circle before her with the dagger. Her eyes burned with knowledge of death, and she barely needed to tell her city's foes that they were all going to die.

More soldiers crashed into the back of the Greeks; before the front man had finished turning, Cassandra had buried her dagger in his neck. Killing men was not only inevitable but easier than Witch hunting. As shields and greaves clashed around her, Cassandra slipped through like a bird, driving her dagger between armour, under the screams of rage filling the temple courts.

Four men were clashing before her, all with Greek shields. One warrior slashed another's neck, knocked the second aside with his shield—as his sword caught in the third man's stomach, the second came back with blow that would have split his neck, if Cassandra hadn't rushed beneath it and cut the artery under the last attacker's arm.

The warrior ripped his helmet off and stared in disbelief; of course, it was Coroebus. In a second, their hands were together, and they were in the Temple.

The flame over the altar cast pale light on faces locked in prayer.

"Cassandra? Thank Athena you're safe; thank the gods you didn't take me for a Greek. We switched our armour with fallen enemies to surprise them—it's not honorable, but I could hardly think...by all the gods, you were right. How— *why* are you here? Why are you shining...?"

"I can't explain everything, but this time, believe! I saw you die here. I know you won't, but I have to tell you to go!"

"I have to stay, Cassandra. I doubted, I failed you. I couldn't live if I didn't protect you now."

"You can't protect me," Cassandra smiled in a wonky, tearful way, "But I think we can fight together."

"Sorry. You fought like Hector himself back there. If you'd ever fought beside him—"

"As if taking up weapons ever brought Troy anything but pain. As if the blood-guilt on us all is still too light. As if the world needed another hero!" Squeezing Coroebus' arm until he winced, Cassandra stared away; the flames through the Temple door shed hell on her face. "Penthesilea was born to fighting, but it was never my nature. How could I stand at the altar with you, covered in dirt and metal? How could I teach Troy's children peace and forgiveness? I didn't want to kill, I never even wanted to change

history...dear Coroebus, I just wanted to know the true future. I thought it would all be good..."

Their heads rested together a second, before a footstep came down in the doorway. Cassandra knew before she looked that it was the giant in her final vision. His spear was bloody down to his hand. He was grinning.

"Coroebus, please believe me. If you fight that man you will die. Let me kill him; then we'll escape together."

"Cassandra...you're shaking. That's Ajax of Locris, I can't let you—"

"Boy." The monster rumbled, "Stop clinging to a woman and fight. Or are women all there is for me here?"

Cassandra darted forward, faster than human or Witch. Ajax swung his spear haft, but struck air as Cassandra slashed through his bicep.

"Men," She muttered, "So predictable."

She sunk her knife again, dodging blows that would've carved an ox, but flesh wounds would never take him down. She hadn't gone for his body because she was frightened. And tired, magic weakening. She could see the next stab coming, but her footing was wrong—

Coroebus was charging at Ajax, driving his sword into the giant's midriff.

Roaring, Ajax knocked him down with a blow. Cassandra darted in, and stabbed into Ajax's chest.

They were fighting together. Just like hunting Witches with Penthesilea, it seemed something noble and right. For a moment, she saw nothing but Coroebus, standing up to strike, face red with effort—then his body shook and fell.

Blackness covered Cassandra's soul gem, instant as the last sunlight dropping away. She was still looking at the thin man who had stabbed Coroebus's back, when Ajax planted his fist in her stomach. She dropped; her Puella Magi costume flashing back to her normal clothes.

"Odysseus." Ajax's voice, "Honorless as ever, I see."

"You know they'd have killed you, Ajax, and then killed me on their way out. I just want to live through this hell and see my family again."

"This woman is mine. Any problems?"

"Please yourself," Odysseus sniffed distastefully; "I don't imagine I could stop you."

The cold statue of Athena looked down on Cassandra. The screams of Trojan women rang in her ears. For the first time everything in her world was silent and murky. And within an hour, the girl who had wanted to know the future knew and wanted nothing but hate.

Ten years later

Circe's Barrier was the Underworld. A river through black caverns, high as mountains. As Odysseus hauled his mouth into air for a second, the rocks crashed over him, forced him back down into the green darkness. His lungs burned, and his limbs were broken. He didn't know how long it had lasted, but until Athena came walking over the water to him, he knew it would never end.

Without ceremony, the tall goddess reached down and pulled Odysseus from water. He wept with fear to hear Circe's screaming. Her twelve thin-fanged heads crowded the darkness above.

"Whoever you were," Athena stated, "You had quite the imagination. But by the power of wisdom, justice will prevail."

"By the power of the moon," An unseen girl responded, "Your fate is sealed!"

Arrows rained down on the monster from above; it struck about with its mouths and flung whirlpools and rocks at Athena in a storm; but she struck with her spear until it was crippled. Then a gigantic spear fell like a

thunderbolt. Circe the Witch cried once and died, the world around Odysseus vanished.

"...okay? There, just breathe. You're in Troy."

"Troy?" Shivering, Odysseus stared up at Athena, "But, goddess...I went as far as the underworld. I saw my mother, dead. I was turned into an animal, devoured by giants, tortured until I begged for death..."

"The Witch. All in your head."

"Ajax?"

"I hear he threw himself off a cliff, four years ago. You had the Witch's kiss on you for...ten years? I've never seen one before that could bear a grudge."

"Ten years. Gods. I mean, goddess, thank you...I should find a ship. Get home.

Home. Ship..." Athena watched the thin, rag-cloaked figure stagger away from the ruined city.

"Well another triumph for the good guys," Athena turned to the shorter girl beside her, wearing a brief tunic and carrying a bow, "Do you think we should tell them we're Puella Magi, not goddesses?"

"I think the real Olympians would be first to complain if they minded, Diana.

Your archery really kept the Witch pinned down; just try not to get in so close."

"Okay," Diana pouted, "You can be so uptight sometimes."

"*I'm* uptight? What about the time you shot that guy for peeking at you in the bath?"

"Oh *don't*, I'm embarrassed! Only you're allowed to see me like that..."

Laughing together, the two Puella Magi walked away from Troy's ruins. They strolled along the beaches where so many had fallen, careless of past and future.

***Chapter 4*: Nimue**

Britain, around 500 AD

The girl stood outside the hovel where the last true druid in Britain had lived for thirty years. Merlin was struck by the defiance in her green eyes; with Britain half-occupied by Saxon raiders, he was more used to seeing fear.

"You want training as a Druidess?" Merlin looked her up and down, and licked dry lips, "Ask me on your knees, girl."

"My name is Nimue, and I heard how druids kneel to no one." A sharp voice, under its pleasant Welsh lilt.

"Druids are men, girl. For women, nothing is so simple."

"Only men? I'm disappointed," Nimue gestured with quick motions to the wreath of holly over Merlin's snowy hair, and the similar adornment of the carved Green Man hung on his cluttered hovel's wall, "I thought magic was meant to bring humans to the level of the gods."

"Ha! That's the old dream. You might glimpse the gods' country, at the end of some rainbow, but human limits are all you'll ever find." Nimue's gaze endured under Merlin's dark eyes. The old man looked away and sighed, "Of all the druid's huts in Britain, why did you walk into mine?"

"You want flattery now? Well, I'd heard down the valley you were the wisest man in Britain. I could see the folk were healthier and happier than anywhere else, so I honestly expected—"

"Something more than this hole? I swear there were days when Druids judged kingdoms and made kings—and, by Pan, this wretched island needs its shepherds now. But since the Romans burned Anglesey's sacred groves,

no one has faith in our magic; we're reduced to brewing cow cures for peasants.

Christians wouldn't be spreading like vermin if the people knew wisdom from pig's shit!"

"The king is no Christian."

"True, young Arthur believes in nothing but himself. A fine philosophy, if he had any sense!" Still swept up in his own rant, Merlin thumped the ground with his staff, "Kings and warlords squabble like dogs now the Romans have left—the Angles and Saxons take more land every summer. Britain must unite under her own gods, for her own future! Your children could have all the learning of Rome, and the freedom of a sceptered isle. Or they could be blonde Germanic bastards, knowing nothing but theft and slaughter."

"I mean to make my own future, rather than trust it to my children, sir. I'd say you should do the same, if your will matches your words. Otherwise I'm going off to go learn cow cures from an ordinary druid."

Merlin wondered what had compelled him to speak so honestly, as if this girl were his equal. Nimue stared at the tattoos ringing his arm as Merlin held out his staff, a shepherd's crook hung with bones and mistletoe.

"These are for guiding innocent fools. Where would you take them, girl? What is your dream?"

Nimue seemed briefly lost for an answer, but replied with a smile.

"My wish is to find the dream perfect to myself, sir. I am here to learn."

They first heard of Witches two years later, when the white dragon came to the lake. A girl who escaped babbled of lidless red eyes; several fishermen died in staring madness. The King's warriors wouldn't budge against such an enemy without spiritual weapons.

"A fool's errand," Merlin grumbled, after the messenger had left, "They should throw monks at the beast, and give us something to laugh at." Nimue only stared directly at Merlin, until he announced that they should probably go.

Nimue took spirit mushrooms for the first time. With Merlin, she set out skull poles before the lake and burned herbs at the points of the compass. With raised

arms, they howled down every curse they knew on the dragon's head, and invented more on the spot. The king and his men stood behind them, practical and unmoving. The dragon remained with the reeds and mist, unseen and unassailable. With no way forward, and no thought of showing doubt, the druids went on until sweat poured from their faces. They called on every god ever known, and presently something came.

Pagur Ban, the white cat.

– *Nimue! I can give you magic to slay this Witch, and any wish your heart desires. Merlin. You have found a girl with the power. Humanity has been served by your existence–*

The druid's face was ravaged mask of age, as Nimue looked narrowly at the white cat. Finally she bent and whispered something in its ear.

As Nimue dropped into the lake, a sea-green gown unfurled over her legs, and a hunting spear flashed into her hand. The strongest warriors flinched at the screams and shapes within the mist as the dragon and druidess fought. Finally, the water churned with vanishing blood.

Nimue rose from the lake, graceful in her stillness and solemn in her power.

Merlin smiled bitterly at her, and then turned to see every warrior, even Arthur, kneeling to him.

"Sir—the kingdom has need of such power. Your magic and your attendant spirit seem mightier than a hundred swords," Arthur stood and looked at Merlin like someone trying to learn respectfulness.

"A leader of vision to have noticed, Sire!" Turning his back on Nimue, Merlin clapped his hand on Arthur's shoulder.

Hours later, the two druids met near royal longhouse where the kingdom's finest warrior drank themselves under the benches every night, Merlin asked Nimue why she had wished that everyone who heard of him would believe in his magic.

"You guessed! You really are the sharpest man in the kingdom—more than that, you've got a dream that needs people to listen. I'm content with this." Nimue twirled her spear about herself faster than sight, "As for the honour, the authority to shape the future—I believe you're the best one to hold it."

"So in fulfilling my dream, I have become keeper of yours?"

"Just remember it's my dream, granddad. I'm the one who's going to earn it."

Three years later.

A party of woodcutters passed Nimue and Merlin on the road. They averted eyes from her, even as they pointedly grovelled before Merlin. Although worship was the only luxury of his new standing that the druid enjoyed, he ignored them.

"You don't look well, girl; you should take a willow bark potion. Slaying monsters must be no small thing."

"Not having Seeds from them is worse." Nimue certainly look tired; almost much older than she'd been "How's your qork ?"

"A Cornish village massacred by a three-headed giant. King Mark has promised his daughter's hand to the warrior who removes the problem; but of course only you can even see these beasts. I want you to wait a week, until Sir Kay reaches Cornwall before you kill it."

"Really? I admit I can't marry the princess, but what happened to honour?"

"Magic doesn't build confidence, in alliances." Merlin stared into the distance, against the wind, "Arthur believes I can see the future; he'll barely decide a thing without consulting me, and the other kings listen. We're binding every kingdom in Britain together. The Round Table Oath, a united Britain without idiot raids and struggles. Then I can truly change this country. Your work

"A part." Nimue kicked at the road sourly, "I'll do it. But you do something about the monks at Glastonbury."

"Politics, girl. We need them for now to ally with the Christian kings—"

"You know my parents sent me to a nunnery, before I ran off?" Nimue interrupted, looking up at the sky, "Their God isn't like ours. They make sheep of the people with their eternal hell and they eat money for their stone churches.

They believe women are the source of the world's suffering—"

"I can't imagine where they got that idea. Alright, *alright*, I'll scare them off with curses as soon as it's expedient."

Nimue looked at Merlin bitterly, as if she already knew that he meant what he said, but would never find an expedient time.

A year later

When the Saxon finally realised what the Round Table meant, they poured into the British kingdoms like a land-consuming monster. Merlin planned the defence of Badon Hill, before he cast the spells that strengthened friends and terrified foes. Arthur led the men who fought to the end of their strength. And Nimue broke more Saxon shield-walls than any warrior present, leaping above horned helmets to stab down like a wave,

Afterwards, she leant on her spear and tried to count the heaps of fur-clad corpses. Behind her, Merlin chanted a blessing over a warrior with a split face.

He looked over the surviving warriors, and realised their hollow eyes were fixed on Nimue, not him.

"You see? They respect you. You're the goddess of victory after all; I'm just an old man associated with death."

"Queen Cleopatra was worshipped as Isis reborn. Boadicea crushed the Romans without even using magic at all. And I'm a nameless servant spirit, born to lift you into a high country I've no part in at all. Because of my wish, I can't blame the gods for that, or curse the devil for the massacred villages from here to the channel. This is the world my wish made, and if there are things I despise—like a goddess, I can blame only my own limits."

Merlin would always remember that Nimue spoke without looking at him.

"I've been selling my soul for power since I was twelve. And still, all I have is power over fools. I want real power from beyond the limits of men. I'll pay whatever you ask."

Merlin's fierce gaze lanced back at him from the white cat's red eyes.

— What do you imagine we need from you? Have you asked Nimue to tell you our secrets?—

"No. Don't I already owe that woman everything I have? For scraps of knowledge, she'd force me to run the kingdom her way, and overturn the Round Table in a year. I have strength in me still, and like a foolish old man, I want her to see that."

— I see. The power can't be learnt anyway; it is a thing you become. You could only find your wish by completely remaking your essence.—

" How? "

— Have you heard of the cauldron of Dyrnwch, the druid of the Llyn peninsular of Ireland?—

"Of course I've heard of it. A treasure of Britain from the god's time—it held the potion that gave Talesin his wisdom. Dyrnwch and the death-

worshippers he leads won't let it be taken unless every one of them is dead."

– Yes. A slaughter entirely for your own gain. Britain and Ireland might fall into war. All your alliances would be thrown to chance. And after that, within the cauldron, you could truly understand the deal that Nimue made for the power of a god, and follow her. You know she needs your help–

"Of course she does," Eyebrows bristling, Merlin threw his staff on his shoulder,

"Of course, I have to follow her. Fifty years the wisest man in Britain, and I'm still ready to go questing off into Hades for power and the gaze of a woman."

The Llyn forests were so green they were black, as tightly woven as knotted hair. The press of trees made pockets out of flowery aromas and the rotting growth-stench.

Around the village of Dyrnwch, the trees were hung with skulls and severed heads preserved in lime. Some of King Arthur's greatest warriors had spilt all their blood on the long journey to the village clearing, along with dozens of half-naked wild men painted with woad. By the time the British had got to the huts, no one had been in any mood to stop killing, as if a certain weight of death was needed to make the quest worth the prize.

In the central hut, Merlin stood over Dyrnwch's body—believing every curse Merlin poured onto him, the cult leader had cut his throat with his own sickle.

The cauldron was at the hut's centre, and Nimue stood before it.

"I don't want you to take this power, Merlin, and neither do you. I won't ask a thing of you again—but if all I've done for you means anything, lets go back.

Save Britain your way; leave the curse of this magic to me."

"A curse?" Striding forward, Merlin seized Nimue's arm. "Fifty years, I worked for every scrap of respect—then you gained magic beyond my dreams in an instant! You could break my neck like a twig, but I know you won't. So don't tell a druid what he should do, woman."

Green eyes fixed on Merlin's face, lips compressed, Nimue stepped aside. Merlin bent to drink the broth from the cauldron. It burnt on his tongue, but there were no lights, vision or bursts of power. The last druid just quietly fell back.

In the chaos, Nimue carried Merlin to a basalt cave, pushed from under the roots of oaks, deep in the forest. She knelt beside Merlin, eyes as close to finally shedding tears as he'd ever seen.

"The cat told me the cauldron would give you the power; if you knew the whole price, you'd think death would better as well. I poisoned the bloody thing. I

warned you; but I couldn't let you..."

"Warned me? You killed me, Nimue. You've doomed Britain and the Round Table. Thrown away both our dreams for nothing. And I'm such an old fool I still can't hate you."

"Don't say you loved me." Nimue bent her head over Merlin, eyes flaring, "You never listened to me, you wouldn't give a speck of your power and tired to take my own. You never gave me my own free will. But I took it. I killed you. I gave up my soul for *this*..." She squeezed Merlin's head in her hands, and stared at his face, helpless to turn away.

— Do you see the deal Nimue made now, Merlin? Everything in the world, for a poisoned cup?—

The white cat's shadow stood over the cave mouth. Raising himself feebly, Merlin cursed it for a liar and a thief.

— The truth is; nothing would've given you magic. You're too old. You wanted your dream, but you never believed it. Something like 'peace and

justice for all', right? Well, why don't you think any Puella Magi before now have wished death or war out of existence? Oh, the wishes are theoretically unlimited; but all the girls ever wish for is a world they believe is the right one. Their pet dog healed of scabies, or a hero for a child. And once they hold their wish, they despair of themselves. Not even magic lets humans escape their limits—

"My father..." Merlin's voice was quavering, "...talked like that before he killed himself. Always said I should have been a carpenter. I *hated* my father..."

"What about your limits?" Nimue snarled, "With all your power, wasn't Merlin a threat you couldn't abide? Wasn't that why you had this man killed?"

— Oh, his united Britain would just have lowered energy yields. Stability means fewer dreamers. War means anger, loss, and droves of new Puella Magi . When the Saxon and Irish invade again next year, now your best warriors are dying in this forest, chaos will bring a rich harvest. Why do you think we caused the fall of Rome? The empire was useful while it expanded, but now humans are

due about five hundred years more of anarchy. And you're still going to be an important part of it—

"Bastard..." Nimue stared at Merlin's face, "You heard a woman scorned becomes worse than a demon, and every man in Britain scorned me. I always thought about killing those drunken pig-faced bastards, and inside of a minute I'll be free to start. I'm glad you'll be dead as well, you scheming dirty old man.

I wouldn't want you to see it."

"Heh. I've seen enough already girl. If I'm reborn in a future life...I'll just be seeing the same things, over and again..."

With Merlin's last breath, the gem on Nimue's cloak became black, and the air was rent a thousand ways. The Witch that emerged was a woman of

black mud, and marsh-weeds; impenetrable, uncontrollable, suffering. Arthur and the Round Table would be destroyed by her.

Morganna Le Fay.

A/N: Nimue (or Vivan) was a follower of Merlin associated with the Lady of the Lake. According to legend, she desired Merlin's power, and promised to sleep with him, but used Merlin's spells to bury him in a cave under an endless trance. King Arthur, of course, was neither English, nor probably Christian.

The Arthurian Holy Grail quest was adapted centuries later from several Celtic tales about quests for magical cauldrons. The comparison of Kyuubee with Merlin's over-rational father recalls the legend that the famous wizard's father was an incubus. For a similar and much better version of the Arthurian Legend, read the Warlord Chronicles , by Bernard Cornwall.

As well as thanking everyone who has reviewed so far, I must say that I have ideas for all the chapters i'm likely to write, but the suggestions of Amelia Erheart and Marilyn Monroe as Puella Magi will be referenced in later chapters.

***Chapter 5*: The two Alices**

Ox ford, 1862,

(as recalled by Alice Pleasance Liddel forty years later) Everyone knew Alice Kingsley. But I liked to think I was her only real friend, quiet little thing though I was. Her parents had passed away from typhus years ago (my own mother nearly died from typus, so I was something between us apart from our Christian names). She'd been adopted from a founding's home by Canon Kingsley, one of Papa's friends. The Kingsleys had no other children; so it might have been on their account, or simply from her own nature, that Alice K. would do the most outrageous things.

She could climb over the college chimneys like a monkey, golden hair flashing away. Following respectable ladies around, she would exaggerate

their mannerisms ridiculously. She'd even play with common town children in the mudflats. When she was curious about anything—and when it was something improper she was only ever curiouiser—she would go up to gentlemen and ask about them quite boldly. Some unconventional Dons even answered her like an adult.

Of course, her father always scolded her in the hope of doing some good. I remember the time she persuaded me to explore the college cellars with her, and she broke open a bottle of wine. And afterward she made such a fuss that no one even noticed what a state I was in, although she got the worst beating for it I've ever heard of. So you must see; she was really a good girl. Not even noisy—she had a reflective look, as if she were really *looking*.

Alice K. wanted to be an explorer and an archaeologist when she grew up. I told her it was impossible for a woman. She said that in the future we would be able to do six formerly impossible things before breakfast. The argument over gentlemen holding the door for ladies was typical of her;

"...why does the woman always have to go through, and not the man?

Whenever a hooligan with a club was hidden round the side, we'd get hit first

every time! There ent no reason—"

(She would speak in dialect for fun, and do it perfectly, though she really knew Queen's English as well as anybody)

"Um. You should say, 'there isn't any reason'..."

"That's exactly the same thing! Most of the people in Oxford say 'Ent' for isn't—

what earthly reason is there for one to be wrong and the other right?"

"W-w-well, my dear Alice K., one w-way or the other has to b-b-be right, or p-people would say anything at all, and not uh-uhnderstand each other." Mr Dodgson had overheard us, and edged over with his pile of maths books,

"It'd bu-bu-be like gu-gu-going away with a b-b-blank p-paper instead of a m-map."

"Oh, you're *right*, Professor Dodo. I meant what I said about the way everyone does it being stupid though."

"W-well, you should mean w-what you say, Alice K. ...of course, that isn't the s-same as s-spouting off everything you m-m-mean."

Mr Dodgson was so clever; and so delicate and gentle you just wanted to protect him. I simply couldn't understand why he never got married. He loved talking to Alice K., and their talks were the only time I was certain she was happy. When he was with us, Mr Dodgson was always happy as a schoolboy over some photo, drawing or strange bit of maths; I only saw him look sad once or twice when he thought he was alone. Just like a small boy, so delicate and gentle you only wanted to protect him. I still can't understand why he never married. He would go out of his way to chat and take lunch with my sisters and me as well. Though I didn't know *what* he saw in a little dark plain thing like me.

—0—

Mr Dodgson always loved photos. He was going to take a picture of us both beside the river, on the day we met the white rabbit, but forgot to go when he noticed how lovely the Cathedral was in sunshine. The creature we met did

look something like a cat or a ferret, but its ears looked like a rabbit more than anything else.

— *Alice Kingsley. Alice Liddel. Make a contract with me and become Puella Magi!*—

"A contract?" I shivered.

"A Puella Magi?" The fatal curiosity was in Alice K.'s eyes.

– The Puella Magi are magical warriors who fight against evil Witches. You can make any one wish, and I'll give you magic to fight with. It's a serious choice, so don't let anything hold you back–

"Only one wish? Could I wish to be a queen?"

– Something might be contrived. Anyway, if you can't decide now, then I won't sit around all day for an answer!–

"Are you late, or something? "Alice K. laughed merrily, and petted the rabbit, whose fox-like tail swished in apparent happiness, "What kind of engagement does a fairy rabbit have to hurry off to? Don't worry, I've got my wish. What about you, Alice L.?"

"You mean, you're...? Oh, Alice. I really don't know. There'd be such trouble if our parents found out we'd spoken with a talking rabbit, and agreed to fight monsters without asking them first..."

"Oh, spare me." Alice K.'s smile shone like the river, "Don't talk about what people would say. It's absurd, when I know you'd rather just make sure they never find out! I know you do, Alice L., I can feel the need for adventure inside you."

Laughing, she went to tickle me; I barely broke away. I stared away into the trunk of a willow, trying to slow my heart. The desire to follow them to the unknown world sang in my ears. The white rabbit might dart away; I had to decide.

– Even a priest like your father doesn't know of the unseen threats to mankind, Alice Liddel. He could never understand your choice. But you could protect his world of innocence by night, in an invisible army–

I looked from its glassy eyes to Alice K.'s brown ones, and thought before I spoke.

"Alice...you're quite right to say that I'm more afraid of being scolded by Father than fighting dangerous Witches. It's true that right and wrong aren't

a matter of what people say. So, even if no one would ever know, we shouldn't do this.

Our parents told us not to go with strange people, and the bible probably says..."

"Stuff the bible." Alice K. said it quietly, so close I felt her breath, "Our fathers preach about the Rich Man and Lazarus, then stuff themselves while kids are starving in the next street. And they call actors and scientists sinners, for thinking and having fun. It's a mad world, Alice L., and I need to get out of it.

Good luck...and keep your head, alright?" She hugged me once—I'd never felt anything like it. Before I could say anything back, she turned to the white rabbit. "My wish is that no one will ever tell me what to do. I want always to be a girl, and have fun."

She fell to the bank, smiling like a dream, as a glowing yellow jewel rose from her chest. I very nearly fainted, and the white rabbit was gone before I recovered.

We went home without looking at each other.

A few weeks later, Mr Dodgson took me, Alice K. and my sisters boating on the river. To distract my mind, I begged him to tell a story. When he mentioned the white rabbit I went cold (Mr Dodgson admitted later that Alice K. had confided in him), but everything was lost within minutes in the funniness and wonder. Alice K. loved the story even more.

—0—

Shortly after that, Alice K. disappeared from the Kingsleys' house. A brief search was made, and nothing else said. Things jogged on much the same at home; I took French and drawing lessons, saw mother and father every week before

church and Sunday lunch. I saw Alice K. once more, about two years later. I was sitting out in the garden on a sunny day, and when I turned my head

and the white rabbit was there

– Alice Liddel? Your friend is in trouble and needs help! You should go to the railway station, right now–

I had to follow the rabbit, but I ran all the way. She was slumped around the back of a shed, wearing a beautiful yellow silk dress with starched petticoats and an apron, that I'd never seen before. Her back seemed to have been slashed by a huge claw.

I kept calm, and did what I could for her wound. Within a minute she woke; with her old grin, she launched into such inquiries as if she'd just returned from a fortnight's holiday.

"How...have you been living?" I finally asked.

"Oh it's quite wonderful! Those Witches do such hideous things that it's jolly satisfying to smack all their heads off. I can still feel angered, but never the least bit sad. Battles with Witches, battles for territory—every day has a strange new adventure! Things like this happen all the time, but I heal awfully quickly, and it's really the danger that makes the game! All I need for everything to be perfect is company." Her white hands seized mine; her smile was bright and immortal,

"Come on; a real adventure! It's a world of magic and freedom! Nothing like this pale excuse."

"Freedom? Free to enter, for you...but isn't it so dangerous?"

"Only the hopeless wets go blubbing on about their souls, or how much their wounds hurt. And you'll be alright if you're with me." Her brown eyes innocently proclaimed that anyone against her could count on nothing but a smile and a stab. I shook my head, eyes tight shut. Alice got up, smoothing her dress. Picking up the sword about as tall as me that she'd had lying beside her.

The healing strength of eternal childhood had already closed her wounds.

"You're not going to change, are you? It's fair enough, if I can't. Just see me off, please?"

Alice K. walked out onto the platform, onto the rails. There were cries of shock everywhere, but she looked quite sensible, calm and happy. She even waved, as she started running towards the railway tunnel, the huge sword trailing from one hand.

– You saw, didn't you, Alice Liddel? She feels no sadness, as she wished, and no moral sensibility at all. Always a child, but not human for much longer.

Like Little Nell, dying with a smile on her face. You can save her. But you have to follow her–

The white rabbit lay above the tunnel, red eyes looking down. There was something in the darkness I knew no one else could see. Iron, not just moving but *living*, and breath like a dragon. I remembered how many suicides had been reported at the station in the last month. I knew what Alice K. was facing.

However she'd changed, she was my friend, but I was still too frightened to speak. I looked away and let her go, as the shocked crowd surged around me like a hurricane.

–0–

It was more a shock than a surprise when it came. I wandered away from Governess on a walk in the Botanical gardens, thinking of the day I'd failed my friend, and everything changed.

The rose bushes became red and white at once; as if one was painted over, but I could see both. The angles of the trees, the grass, and the fountains that looked like giant eyes, somehow became different from anything we'd ever done in geometry class. Streams of rodents, small birds and even flamingos flew everywhere like a magic show. I was terrified enough before I seemed to shrink to something the crowd of animals could trample or eat in a bite. Terror sent me all to pieces; I could have been anyone at all,

weeping in the face of death. I wished I was someone else and anywhere else. That I didn't deserve everything that was happening to me.

Faces flashed over the horizon, vanishing as I called to them. A grossly fat doormouse, a griffon with iron claws. A caterpillar, blowing green smoke that

made everything bigger and scarier. A ragged, filthy Hatter and Hare whose looks scared me more than death itself. A world of innocence and fun where nothing was wrong, and anything could be done to you. My memories of Wonderland, come to punish me for rejecting them.

The horde pushed me towards a stretch of children's games. Giant draughts, playing cards that flew about, slapping at my face until I fell—a chessboard. She squatted there, covered in red brocade and jewels. I thought it would be the Queen, but it was the Jabberwocky. A long-legged dragon, with teeth like a rat and a crown of red gold. Light shimmered over it, as the monster in a beautiful dress belched and filled its lungs.

"OFF WITH HER HEAD!"

I could have tried to save Alice K., but I was afraid. I was so afraid I still prayed for her to rescue me, but I knew she wouldn't come. My story would end with those dreadful wide teeth coming down over my face and snapping shut.

"Alice! Alice Liddel!"

A figure madly careered through the chattering throng, and stood between me and the Queen, arms thrown out. It was my white knight.

"Mr Dodgson! How did you come here?"

"So strange? Even non-Euclidean geometry is maths, and I know maths, Alice.

I promise you're going to be alright." Strips of his clothes and some of his skin had been ripped away by the Wonderland monsters, but his stutter had

vanished.

The Queen prepared to roar the last line she remembered again, but Mr Dodgson's voice somehow rang over her.

"Alice Kingsley might not have followed the white rabbit if I hadn't been late to meet her by the river. I should have warned her about the devil's calculations...I should've protected her. Alice Liddel did nothing. Pardon her; be satisfied with me."

The Queen peered down at Mr Dodgson's sweat-glazed face, and made a gurgling noise that might have been a laugh. I saw its true madness then; even it were cut to bits, it would still have been having fun.

A coward to the end, I couldn't speak as the Queen's long neck slowly descended, and its bright red tongue snaked out to touch Mr Dodgson's throat.

Then all the card and animals roared and laughed around us like a wind, and we were back in the gardens.

Past everything else, I regret not explaining properly why I was covered in scratches, and dear brave Mr Dodgson's clothes were hanging off him in tatters.

Father said no one from our family should ever speak to him again. As the rumour spread that he'd done something horrible to me rather than saved me from a dreadful monster, all the families in Oxford dropped him, and he left his rooms in the college less and less.

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I never saw Alice K. again, but I saw Mr Dodgson once. Discovering my courage too late, I sneaked out late at night, and crossed town to the university in my nightdress. I'd resolved to thank him properly, though I wanted to wash his feet with tears like the woman in the bible. I still don't know if I didn't make a mistake.

I hesitated outside his room when I heard a thumping noise. I peered round the door; Mr Dodgson was mashing his forehead against the blackboard coated with spiky calculations. The white rabbit was perched on a table behind him.

"Maths is made by humans; assumptions, logic, desires. A dangerous tool in the hands of the devil...and this proof, this entropy that will helt the universe, is nothing but a devilish lie of the enemy of Christ..."

– Maths describes reality, Charles. It doesn't have assumptions, or desires; good and evil mean nothing to it. We are maths; we are reality. And we need you to help us save the universe–

"Why? Why this book...?" Mr Dodgson clutched his neck; under his fingers there was a red mark.

– It's quite convenient. Most carriers of a Witches Kiss die within weeks; not many are simply compelled to tell a single Puella Magi's story. I really would write the book, Charles. Of course, we'll make sure Alice in Wonderland is printed, translated; spread all over the world–

"You will?" Mr Dodgson bravely tried to sneer, " You'll pop down to MacMillian's publishing, for a word to the owners over tea and cakes?"

The white rabbit scratched its ear. Its mouth seemed nothing more than the fixed grin of a skull.

– We're rather good at persuading humans, Charles, and not just young girls.

You're a churchman, aren't you? The witch-hunts originated from us; they created far more Witches than they killed Puella Magi. When they collected up your Bible at Nicaea, we made sure all the verses on female chastity and humility stayed in, and all the women of any character were smeared or forgotten. Whenever the the Amazons, the Celtic warrior queens or the Trung sisters threatened a matriarchy, we would use the Athenians, the Romans or the Ming Chinese to hammer them down.

– *Human society must hurl mud at women, demand impossibilities from them, and bind them like a cope of lead. If their own efforts could get them their wishes, they'd hardly ever be turning to us, you understand? However, we may have gone too far in the last 200 years. Even women who could be Puella Magi desire nothing but their little social prison, just like that failure Alice Liddel.*

Anyway, when Queen Victoria refused us, we saw the need to give little girls their dreams back again.

–*Your book will wake the imagination of every girl who reads it. Create desire for a world beyond this primitive morass of gas and brick. Your book will make Puella Magis; it will make the future you need to survive. Help save the world, in fact–*

"With monsters like that thing the Botanical Gardens?" Mr Dogdson slumped into his chair as if life was leaving him, "It doesn't add up. I'm not writing it."

– *You will. The Witches Kiss shows you her vision of childhood. Let it get stronger and you'll start loving little girls in a way that hurts them. Or you might want to save the girls that have gone astray so much that you start stabbing prostitutes and bar girls down the West End...–*

I couldn't hear any more. I ran down the staircase of staring griffons and rabbits and out over the ancient lawn, away from the terrible white rabbit, and the man who had bought my life, perhaps with many others.

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Of course, I bought a copy of *Alice in Wonderland*, three years and a lifetime after that day by the river. I made myself read every word on every page; but I wondered by the end if Mr Dodgson hadn't got the better of the white rabbit after all.

I couldn't decide if *the* Alice was Alice Kingsley, or me. She had poor Alice K.'s curiosity, and her courage. But I think she had my sense of place; she knew where her home was, and that her dream was for waking up from. She

saw the absurdness and cruelty of Wonderland; more than that, she had the nerve to tell it off, and walk away. Alice might have been the best of both me and Alice K. A girl who could dream without making dreams her master, as Kipling put it.

It's been years since all those things happened; I toured Europe, and of course, married Reginald. I've kept Cuffnal Hall and the Women's Institute running smoothly in the proper, sensible fashion, for many years. Life demands little of me, but for the sake of the past I do what I can.

Of course I heard nothing more about Alice K., my dear Mr Dodgson, or the white rabbit. The world seems to be ticking along quite happily as well. The country they wandered away to may be one I will never reach. But I have faith that the Lord protects his children, even in Wonderland.

A/N: Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, was later suspected of the Jack the Ripper murders on very slight evidence. Alice Liddel lived into her

nineties. Alice Kingsley is apparently (thank you CherryBlossomAsterHino) the full name given to the Alice (who has always been far more blonde and outgoing than Liddel ever was) in the 2010 movie.

***Chapter 6*: Sacagawea and Charlotte** *A/N: Janey was Clark's nickname for Sacagawea (quite understandably) while Rebecca was the Baptismal name the English gave Pocahontas after her marriage to John Rolfe. She returned to London with him, and died of illness within a year. Thirty years later, her father's extensive alliance of tribes in East Virginia had been largely destroyed.*

Montana, USA, 1805

Tiny between the endless land and the sky, the canoes passed through the gates of the Rocky Mountains. Even with the mirror of the water lifting them in its arms, the cliffs swept vertically above them for over a thousand immovable feet.

The men blinked in the water-magnified sunlight, tough and unshaved in their mixture of faded uniforms and buckskin. Most of the expedition removed their hats in silence, apart from a fifteen year old Shosone girl who was more concerned with her baby's wind.

"Could be some good fossils in those cliffs." Captain Lewis remarked to his co-leader. Sacagawea half-listened; she found bone-shaped rocks as pointless as the Captains' treasured notebooks and glass rings to stare at dead beetles through.

Plants could be medicine or food, but counting every root and berry between one ocean and the other struck her as singularly pointless. In Captain Clerk's eyes, she saw something like her own thoughts.

"Lewis, a dinosaur could flap right down to us and I wouldn't blink, no sir.

This is the true America; a second Garden of Eden."

"Only with thirty Adams and one Eve!" Toussaint, Sacagawea's Quebecer husband, chortled for some time at his own weak joke.

"I wonder." Lewis smiled, as he thought of a joke himself, "Don't the Shosone call themselves snake Indians?"

Sacagawea didn't much mind the whites talking as if she were deaf and giving themselves such airs; she listened to her husband as little as she could get away with anyway. They were like big children really; constantly amazed, always slightly lost and proud of displaying their own ignorance.

Baby Jean filled his lungs, and started wailing confidently for food. Sacagawea smiled to herself as she bounced him up and down. For all their flaws, children were strong, and seemed to come through everything with confidence; that was probably why she liked them.

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For all their beauty, the Bitterroot Mountains were a terrible part of the journey.

Sacagawea helped force their horses over the narrow ledges, prepared what little game the expedition could shoot, and hugged Jean to her stomach through every bitterly cold night. It was like being thrown out of Eden into Nod.

By the Lolo pass, every spare horses had been eaten. Nothing but thin grass could be had from the ground. The men choked down candle-wax to give them strength to cross the broken trails. Clark and Toussaint made certain Jean got whatever food they had, and Sacagawea loved them for it.

The journey was harsh but not hopeless, until Sgt Floyd started screaming about spiders and threw himself from a towering cliff. That night, Sacagawea plonked Jean down in her husband's lap, and walked out of the camp.

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Sacagawea was no expert tracker, especially in lands she hadn't seen for four years. The slave raid when she was twelve had taken her miles away to be joined to the human encumbrance called a husband. Her skills were as an interpreter and animated flag of truce; after the joyous reunion with her brother's tribe at Lehmi pass, he had loaned the expedition competent guides.

However, none of the other Shosone were White Cat Women. As the white men had forged their trail across the land to claim it for the Great Father in Washington, Curse-Spirits of many tribes had weaved around them. Without

Sacagawea, the land itself would have driven them back.

High up the side of a grey peak, Sacagawea clutched her Spirit Rock and sniffed.

Open rivers and sunlit forests; this Curse-Spirit was far from her territory. She climbed higher, until something like a web became visible between two mountains. Jumping from the mountainside, she leapt through.

The circle is broken/lost, lost, lost/the river is black/the tree is dead...

Her snake totem flashed over Sacagawea's chest, as she raised her bow. Legs moved in the darkness around her; a dead willow tree towered above her with a seat carved in the front. Old-Spider-Woman was lying there, a petrified body in a white woman's dress, covered with silk threads and moving bodies.

Spider was a trickster; a totem that slipped from one world to another and bent every rule. Often, it did not bring a happy fate.

She knew the Curse-Spirit had been a White-Cat-Woman. To the Shosone, it was a natural cycle; when women felt themselves going, they would either crush their own Spirit Rock, or set off for the territory of an enemy tribe. Killing Curse Spirits was part of a cycle too.

"I greet you as a woman; I will send you away as a warrior. What was your wish? What is your curse?"

The corpse's jaw dropped open; her voice was like iron crushed between rocks.

"My name...is Rebecca. I wished for peace...between the Nation, and the White people. I stood between the warriors...the Whites took me away...I learned their language, their great God spirit. They took me over the great sea, to the city built on cowshit...dressed me as a White, showed me off like a captive animal...made me sick. Now my people are dead. My curse is on the White God, the White tools and the White children. They are enemies...filthy...liars."

"I will remember you, as a warrior. I am Sacagawea. My totem is snake, bringer

of change. Forgive me!"

The Shosone woman raised a stone-headed arrow, glowing green, and sent a volley into the spider minions. The willow's great arms crashed down around her, splattering black sap. Jumping aside, Sacagawea sent more arrows at the Spider-Woman; the Curse-Spirit's screams seemed almost faint and tired.

Stepping away from a sweeping blow, Sacagawea's leg suddenly collapsed under her. Where her bare skin touched the black sap, it greened and decayed like old meat. Huge spiders rose over her fallen body.

Sacagawea thought of Captain Clark, and how terrible it would really be if he were to die. After facing down bears and hostile tribes, almost drowning, almost starving and living in the wilderness as well as a Shosone born there. She thought of her half-white Jean, and his future. With a burst of healing magic, she leapt up, and twirled to kick a mob of spiders onto their backs. A final stream of arrows twisted around defending branches, and burst in Rebecca's body.

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Finally, the expedition saw the far side of the Rockies. The first thing Sacagawea did with some of the men was gather enough roots for all the exhausted party to satisfy themselves. It was a simple thing but several of them thanked God for her. During one of the most restful evening rests in some weeks, Captain Clark took her aside.

"You've been nothing less than a real trooper, Janey. What with kidnapping, an irregular marriage, and thousand mile treks with an infant, you've had a darn tough time of it. Anything you want for you or your baby, I'll do my damnest to give it."

"Someone else offered me a wish, once," Sacagawea grinned, "I wished to be free."

"Free? Well, this is America. You can feel a freedom out in the wilderness. But in truth we're answering to Jefferson and the people however far we go; hell, we're walking a line to even survive. With everything you been through...would

you say you're free, Janey?"

"Don't know how I even got here," The Shosone woman looked back at the glorious spread of the mountains, caps like pillows, trailing mighty sheet of green trees, "But if I wanted to be anywhere else, I'd have let the spirits eat you all up. You White folk want to go on journeys and change the lands all over.

I'm happy right where I am, and if things do change, I'm happy with that."

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Nine years later, Sacagawea lay in a small shelter within a corner of fort Lisa, Missouri. Clark had taken her child away to a White school, years ago. Her husband was elsewhere, drinking away the near future, and the white cat was at his side. Her Spirit-Rock was steadily going dark.

— I'm very disappointed, Sacagawea. Is this the Native toughness I hear of?

You're not in deep despair—trust me, I know. You're twenty-four. I know I'm no human, but I can't conceive of a lifeform that can simply decide to stop living—

"...you hear things, white cat?" Sweating, Sacagawea still smiled, "Fort Dearborn, and Ohio. Indians fighting the white folk, soldiers and families, killings. Many white folk going west after the war; they'll fight them back, and not know when to stop. I got a feeling, maybe from the spirits...I'll have a lot more sadness if I stay alive longer."

— So you're going to become a Witch with this little despair? You Americans are rather interesting—but the Europeans were always going to beat you. I will take care to save some of your people, Sacagawea. Your unique viewpoint could turn out to be of use to us—

"Then I did do something for my people," Sacagawea turned away from the white cat, eyes hooded, "I didn't just lead white men to them from across the world, and tell them those white men were peaceful and good. It was a few whites going west back then; thousands now. I thought a lot, since then,

I still don't know...but I changed everything for those people. For all the Native tribes in the West; I was their snake."

Caen, France, 1792

(From the destroyed diary of Charlotte Corday, as recorded by Incubator 9B aka Kyubee)

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12th Aug

Another hot week. The smell from the gutters grows worse; the sunlight on Caen only makes blacker shadows. The Witch hunt with Mireille today found nothing. The strongest of the monsters are leaving for Paris, like wolves surrounding a newborn lamb. Mireille talked about us following them, but I don't feel that I can leave my sister and Cuz at this time, and the poor girl was quite unwilling to leave without me. She has travelled far enough from her home that she needs something in me to rest on.

The Assembly is still in chaos after the imprisonment of the King. Foreigners will probably invade to restore him; I hear whispers everywhere that the Royal family should be executed. Even Mireille believes that once deposed the king should die for his abuse of the people. I disagreed with her strongly; Louis Capet has suffered enough for his crimes. The new government must bring forth a system from and for the people. Nothing good can be built on a death.

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10th Sept

Word has reached Caen of the massacres in Paris. What no one will tell a woman, we hear in the bars and casinos where we hunt Witches. The Paris Commune had filled the prisons beyond capacity; with the fall of Verdun to the Prussians, a counterrevolution was feared. Nothing more dreadful than the issue can have been seen in France since the dark ages, if a tenth of

what we hear is true. Priests slaughtered in hundreds. Bodies mutilated and sacked like hay.

Women torn bodily apart. The Princess de Lamballe was killed; I cannot write or imagine what they say was done to her.

Mireille and I have hunted both Familiars and Witches; we have worked hard to protect the helpless and innocent. Now our work seems a children's game, to comfort ourselves while the nation destroys itself. Mireille is as quiet as always, but a great comforter. She reminds me that we can only do the work God gives us as our own. With every monster we kill, precious lives are saved.

The work of remaking France is given to the new Convention. The men like Robespierre, Danton and Marat, who have stood by while mobs slaughtered their own people. Helpless; or more willing to rule over a hell than serve their country.

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22 Jan, 1793

The Prussian invasion was turned back, but the king has still been executed. No matter how inevitable it seemed, it was a cruel and wrong decision. Mireille has become even quieter these past days; I feel guilty for wearying her with my talk of politics. I have encouraged her to remember her childhood in Corsica, and all the varied places and people she has wandered among in her sixteen years. She even spoke of her parents without tears; and her wish for revenge on the Witch that killed them. The dear girl has nothing in her life but the hunt; but she says she is happy to spend her life exterminating such a pestilence. She told me with a smile that if God did not approve of her vendetta, He would not have guided her at last to Caens, or let her meet such a friend as me.

—0—

25 April

Suddenly, Mireille is dead. And I am damned.

We had ranged far to pursue a Witch and defeated it in a hamlet near La Havre.

Mireille looked in poor shape after summoning her giant 'Tiro Noir' musket, so we proceeded home slowly. Although we sensed the Familiar from miles away, it was already too late to run.

We beat it, but Mireille's small body was covered in burns. I tried to use healing magic, but something seemed clenched inside her. The first words she managed were that she wanted me to kill her.

I said I couldn't. She said she was good as dead, nothing but pain. I cried as I told her she would live. She said that something was going black inside her.

Somehow she knew. If I didn't kill her others might die.

I could see she was sinking, but I couldn't do it. I had cut Witches down without mercy, but even for my own life, I could not kill a fellow human, my best friend. Mireille tried to smile and said that was me; kind Charlotte, always wanting to save everyone. Then something black came out of her Soul Gem, screaming with her voice.

Somehow, I killed the Witch. I used her Grief Seed to preserve my own soul; then I returned to Caen, a woman mutilated alive.

I stood by and watched my beloved friend become a monster. I'm no better than the Conventionaries I despised in September. I cannot speak to Cuz or sis.

They don't know I am already a prisoner, alone. Condemned to lose my soul, or accept my cursed destiny.

—0—

28th April

I scarcely expected to see the white cat again. He admitted that nothing could make up for the way he had ensnared us. But as a token, he told me the Witch whose Familiar had maimed K. was in Paris. He told me her name, and I knew her traces already.

I found her in the sewers, the caverns where Marat hid from his enemies in the slime, and hundreds of Puella Magi had battled before me throughout history. I walked into the burning church, where the spirits of fire scream out prayers.

Elektra was the worst enemy for me. Her flaming body was terrible enough, but her eyes shone with light purer than the sun; Mireille had looked on those eyes

and been paralysed—just like all the Witches Elektra must have killed when she was Joan of Arc. She had defended the king, and the king had betrayed her. Now his line had ended; but Elektra's rage was beyond ending. September had been nothing but a single meal to her.

With the blue-striped dress that extrudes darkness, I found the briefest shadows to hide from her glare. Endlessly, I darted out to strike with my sword and away. I was choked, burnt and ready to fall dead when I finally stood behind her neck, summoned a sword as heavy as a cannon, and killed the greatest Frenchwoman who ever lived, for revenge. I didn't want to do it, but I had to.

The monster Joan had become had to killed. Yet I am still alive. God's will; or the devil's temptation?

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8th July

Re-reading Plutarch's *Parallel lives*. The grim medley of stories that change great men into monsters. Just like Mireille, just like Marat. The 'Friend of the People' has been anything but helpless within this month. Hundreds have died on the guillotine, not for crimes but political difference and lies; Marat's paper calls for more death every day. Even in Caen, fleeing

Gironidists are being uprooted from boarding houses and cellars and take away to their death. France is no country but a rat-pit; however I still have hope.

Six years ago, I wished to know the purpose I was placed on earth for. A voice like my own in my head told me I would be an assassin. So I have tried that whole time to live with humanity, fleeing the very thought of killing, which has never been anything other than vile to me.

Now, I will go to Paris and to Marat's house. Like Mireille, like Joan, I will give the pitiable monster the death that he needs, to protect the innocent people I still believe in. Without Witches to spread madness, without evil leaders like Marat, surely the terror will stop. As for me, I will wait in a cell like Joan, fighting to keep this shadowed blue stone from despair. And if I last the night, I will go to the guillotine with a clean soul.

***Chapter 7*: Eve**

The Fertile Crescent, long ago

Long ago, Mankind was about fifty naked souls on the grassy savannah, expending their entire lives, in simply keeping hold of them. With luck and thousands of years, they had realised that fire could be released from sticks, and bones or branches used as clubs. But such tools were parts of the world, not a system of thought; like Mankind itself, they were just there. Despite lacking defence against the hundred deaths of lions, rockslides, winter, starvation and more, people had no knowledge of a different world, and so were not discontent.

Mankind's leader was naturally the man with the strongest arm and clearest head. There was a woman who would probably have been his only wife, if the number of strong babies he fathered was less a matter of life and death. With her habit of staring hard at strangely shaped rocks or clouds, and asking questions without practical worth, Mankind had long advised their leader to cast her off as a maniac, but he couldn't have done it. Something in her strong, quick eyes made the world right for him.

The day came when the man disturbed a sleeping snake, and was bitten. The young men carried him to the shade of a tree to die. The world would get tougher for mankind without him, but, in truth, everything was set to continue after the death as it always had.

The woman didn't see things that way. She sat outside the cave, snarling at anyone who tried to shift her. Staring at nothing, the people could only think she was searching for something. In truth she was creating—from her impossible desires, she was making a world where she did not have to sit in helplessness.

Where a human who loved and dreamed could not be crushed by the world without thought or reason. After a full day, she cried out to any god that existed that she would give her body or her life if she could become a god herself and make the world right.

– Don't cry, Eve. It's going to be alright. Please tell what you expect a god to

be—

The woman looked up at the white spirit, and knelt. She sobbed out that while the lion, the horse and the human continually struggle in hunger for their food, the rain only falls, and the sun only gives its light. Unfettered by need, the gods act only by their nature. It was what she wanted, and a god had heard her.

– I would say I am a god, by your own definition. However, to have power over your fate, you must set yourself and your wish above your people and your family. Even a young goddess can never rely on anything but herself, or blame anyone else for the results of her choices—

The woman refused to accept that the desires for safety, love and justice burning in her head were without remedy. Her wish was for the man and mankind, so she couldn't be leaving them behind. Above anything else in her thirteen years, she had learned the truth that no one could truly help her but herself.

– Marvellous. A mere rat wants more than it has, but humans truly believe they can hold impossibilities. Only your race can imagine beyond itself. You are the saviour of the universe, Eve. What is the wish you are prepared to give up your humanity for?–

The woman wished that humans would rule the earth forever. They would have dominion over every plant and animal; nothing would ever rule over them. As the magic surged through her like a spear, a red gem the size of an apple rose from her chest, and she kissed it. With a thought, she clothed her nakedness in a beautiful dress of wolf fur and woven leaves. From then, she was the strongest in the whole of Mankind, because she understood what was wrong and right.

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Within an hour, she had healed the man's wound. Within a week Mankind was making fire from flint, carried stone axes and spear-throwers. Within months they had begun the work of taming horses and rearing stolen wolf cubs. Within years, they lived in huts, among fields and herds, shifting the crops with wheeled handcarts.

The man told the people everything his wife said—because it was right, and they knew him as strong and clear-headed, all of them followed. For the first time, one man could have more food than another, but it was right because the more you produced, the more you ate. The desire that had been born in the woman spread like a plague, and the world was recreated by their labour and inspiration every day.

Though the woman gave no commands, everyone bowed before her. She didn't even need magic to guide mankind on the right path. She had the man she loved to herself, and her two boys would grow up in a new world.

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When her eldest twin was thirteen, his mother found him sitting under a tree, and sat to watch him and love him. As she watched, flowers opened on the tree above them until it groaned with them, and corn sprung from the

ground around them. When he opened his eyes, she asked him if he had met the white spirit too.

He said he had never seen a white spirit. He had wanted crops to grow, and they had grown. His mother saw that her son was more powerful than she was, but she only loved him more for it.

The younger twin was strong and generous; his flocks bred well and he was more popular than his brother. His mother had to make it clear to her family that the elder son's power and intelligence made the rightful future leader. His brother said nothing against her, but returned from the wilderness one day, and said that the white spirit was displeased at Mankind's ingratitude. He had given them their treasured possessions and lives, if they listened to the white spirit, they would certainly keep them. The woman tolerated the peoples' wrong and useless prostrations. She knew that the world was still a vast and overpowering thing to them, and with their small climb up had come the fear of falling down.

The younger twin began to first disagree with his brother, then criticise him, then finally order him to cease the practise of magic. The white spirit, he said, had foretold that Mankind would be destroyed within a generation if they

practised magic that was not from him.

With his brother's followers all mocking and insulting him, the boy's resentment overcame his senses. When he regained them, his brother was pieces of flesh, and blood.

Afraid because he knew he deserved to die, he would have destroyed Mankind if his mother hadn't beaten him down with her bare hands until they bled. She told him to go and never return. He never did, although the blood-drinking creatures that haunted hills and caves from then on were said to be his offspring.

Afterwards, Mankind began to fear the woman, and whisper about casting her out with her son. She went to her husband, and told him she would only be secure with a place as queen, beside him. She had to be able to speak directly to Mankind and lay down rules to guide them on the right path. No gods could order the lives of free humans, only men and women of intelligence and compassion should rule. She had given her life to save his, and help Mankind, and she would see it helped.

The man refused to let the woman speak for herself. He said that she had already taken away his task of providing for mankind; if she took away his leadership, he might as well jump from a cliff. The woman and man argued, and fought; being stronger and angrier, the woman broke the man's ankle. She saw her son's confusion and pain in his eyes, and collapsed in tears. She implored the man's forgiveness for the wrong she had done.

The man asked if she now knew her own heart, as well as right and wrong. She had not given her life to save his, but for power in a world where men died in equality and innocence. With his stone knife, he scarred her across the face, to show that she was an enemy of mankind.

The woman ran away into the night, across the endless plain; the apple gem grew blacker as she ran and howled. She implored the One who had determined right and wrong, and made her with her desires, to show her mercy on her own foolishness before she died.

Some say the Creator sent an angel to take her pain away and carry her beyond the stars. Others say she found her son, and ate him to keep herself alive; finally she became Lilith, mother of demons. Still others say that the strongest Puella Magi until the last one, and the monster her son became, are still somewhere in the wilderness, waiting for mercy.

Although the man had always led Mankind with fairness and decency, the people put him aside as a cripple, and made his third son their leader. Mankind multiplied; since no one knew the wrongness of putting the midden next to the well, they were soon devastated by plague. The people implored the white spirit for his aid, promising to worship and obey him, if he saved them.

The white spirit replied that the woman had wished for mankind to be ruled by no one; his people would always respect that wish, leaving humans to run their affairs and make their mistakes. He wasn't about to be thrown down for not fulfilling a single one of their prayers, as the man had been.

But the white spirit would never allow Mankind to perish. By its own efforts, man might walk on a level with the gods one day. And if any woman wished to exchange freedom for a Contract, the white spirits would be around for them forever.

A small girl came forward almost at once; over the centuries Mankind pulled itself up into a civilisation, one Contract at a time. By the time of the Law and the Ten Commandments that would determine the morality of every human nation, the fear of magic and women was irreversibly set in the hearts of men, who had no power but what they laboured for with their hands.

Jerusalem, 33 AD

Sweating bodies blocked the girl's way, all along the path out of town. Men were shouting with anger in every direction; she wanted to cry out, but there was nothing in her. Like bees swarming around a dying bear, the crowd of soldiers, priests, mourners, and gawkers followed like bees swarming a dying bear, along the path to the hill for public execution. As running figures carried

news to the town, men and women ran after the crowd, drawn for no reason they could know.

The man under the cross had no glow across his forehead, no nobility in suffering. He was a ravaged, walking casualty, stumbling through an abyss. She truly hadn't expected; she knew what was going happen, but couldn't believe it

– You could save Him, Mary. Doesn't everyone still need His words? Are you going to let everything he told you die here? He told you all to give up your lives to follow him. You can give your life for him now. He would notice you, Mary–

The girl looked down at the grey cat, back at the falling, bleeding man, and couldn't speak.

Avila, Spain, 1533

After fasting for three days, and kneeling upright on stone for a full six hours the young nun looked ready to fall down in a fit. The visions still hadn't gone away. The endless drone of suicides and murders she might have the power to prevent, if she only sold her soul. Even rapes, in exacting detail, that tormented her own repressed sexuality like hell itself. She prayed for her merciful God to take her to heaven, to save her pathetically corrupted nature from the world and its ruling demons.

Presently, an insensible smile came to her face. She could no longer see the chapel; Satan's promises meant nothing. God was above her, stretched out on the cross for her. Her body's agony was nothing but pleasure, in the arms of Jesus. His love and mercy were in the pain, and it filled her up.

"Oh Lord," Teresa gasped, "Let me keep suffering this for you. Or, please...! Let me die right now..."

A white and a grey cat were peeking around the chapel door, somehow managing to look rather embarrassed.

– Her Soul Gem would have been something to see, with such imagination and emotional capacity. I really think you've erred in using mindlink so early, though, 2B. I know the soft approach wasn't going to work when she'd been raised on the stories of witches' cats and Incubi the humans were always going to develop sooner or later. But torture like this just builds her resistance–

The grey cat shook its head sadly.

– How did these creatures ever evolve, 9B? And how can they say we torture them? She desperately wants to save these people from Witches, yet she agonisingly suppresses her natural emotion with superstitious fear. For their religions, families, or any cause at all; their first thought for their miraculous emotions seems always to be smothering them–

Within the chapel, another smaller cat staggered away from the nun, drunk on alien passions, and a fourth feline trotted up to take over the psychic assault.

Sympathising with the woeful irrationalities of humans in the effort to understand them was a peripheral risk for the Incubators; mindlink with humans was so damaging, it could only be done long term in shifts.

– This might be hurting us more than her right now, but she's too valuable to lose. I say you should have the Juniors continue this periodically, until she gets too old to be useable. Do you think we made a mistake in having the Christian superstition promoted, 2B? It reminds me of the poisons and spines prey species evolve to deter their predators–

('9B', in Japanese 'Kyu-bee', incidentally, refers to the number and body type of the Incubator in question. The 'A' series of Incubator bodies had been winged and radiant humanoids designed to overawe. They had scored such historic successes as Eve and Hagar, but had always been more useful for impressing and manipulating men than appealing to young girls. After the line about 'Satan appearing as an angel of light' had snuck into the finished bible, the 'A' bodies had been phased out)

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The two Incubators wandered out into the town park; outside the musty convent, the day was blazing sunshine. Two human workers in such a position would probably have headed for the nearest pub or ramen bar, but the Incubators were creatures of simple tastes and no overwhelming desires. Barring the satisfaction of a worthy job well-done, they were content to stretch out on the grass, and feel the majesty of the universe move around them. The white cat closed his eyes and kept smiling.

– How about Shifting over to France? I'm working on a really cute baker's daughter there, and she feeds me the nicest scraps of cake.–

– Cake? Cute? Are you...–

– Oh yes, I had taste receptors inserted on this body. Human girls find it cuter if I really enjoy anything they feed me. As for cuteness, I think she'll have a very big soul gem, and isn't that attractive? It's interesting, but bigger soul gems usually come from qualities like willpower and the capacity to love that humans generally consider attractive anyway...–

– Look, you're not here to talk background. Tell me what's up, 9B–

– If you insist. I was reviewing the records on Palestine, year 33; your area at the time. You reported that Mary Magdalene Contracted with you for the resurrection of the Anomaly, Jesus Christ–

An 'Anomaly' was a human, like Cain, Buddha and Moses whose latent magical power manifested without a Contract. The incubators were helpless to predict them, but since they were incredibly isolated and awoke the desire of their fellow humans, generally left them alone.

A non-isolated Anomaly had never occurred, but it was the Incubators' ultimate nightmare. If such humans united and found their own way to wake up the incomprehensible power in their races' souls, anything could happen. At worst, the Incubators could be wished from existence. At best, every living human of both genders would go Witch within generations (or worse, stop turning Witch at all).

– That's correct. He healed the sick and Witch-kissed, inspired a new superstition, got revived by a teenager with a crush, and vanished after that.

What's your point?–

– I checked your Grief seed intake, Witch incidents in the area, everything. It doesn't add up. That girl never made a Contract, 2B. Yet the Anomaly was still returned to life –

– That's ridiculous. Why would I have lied? Do you believe he resurrected himself, somehow?–

– That human superstition? Impossible; death unquestionably annihilates the soul.

The only possible explanation is that the girl was an Anomaly as well. Two in one place, 2B. You really should have reported the truth. Both Anomalies would have been put through psychic dissection before Jesus had even stepped out of his tomb–

– Exactly. You would have turned the greatest human of twenty thousand years to a drooling vegetable! I knew it was wrong...but I couldn't–

The white cat looked directly at the grey one, somehow displaying its shock.

– 7B...you've been sick for a long time, haven't you? I don't understand. You were one of the first, the very best.–

The grey cat put his paws on his head. His immovable smile only made the anguish in his voice more painful.

– No one understands. You tell yourself they don't, they don't know what the humans are like...they're violent, disgusting insects, I know, but in a thousand years they could be more than us...we're an imitation of life compared to them!

I know we have to torture them, to save the universe, but it's not right...–

The white cat sadly shut his eyes.

– Everybody. Can you confirm that Incubator 2B has become insane?–

A chorus of psychic affirmatives came in, and six other Incubators Shifted into

existence around 2B. Helpless to resist the rational will of the majority, he did not move or even show pain as they chewed him up alive.

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Afterwards, they looked at each other in silence. They were beyond sympathy, but the end of a life older than human civilisation held some impact.

– How long did he hide it for? – A black cat, 10B, finally asked, – We need to work out how long we've got before someone else goes off his head–

– You're right. 2B was the best. Sooner or later, we'll all be heading the same way– The other cats nodded, accepting the rational, terrifying conclusion. 9B

thought quickly about his own taste sensors and standard of cuteness. He spoke faster;

– I'm shutting down the Teresa Ahumada operation; it's not worth the risk at this stage. I'll take responsibility with the Director. You two Juniors could still get a transfer to New World Surveyors. Self-preservation is a rational impulse–

– 9B, we were trained and designed for this Function! Even if it was Deliveries, we're wouldn't ever do anything else!–

9B wasn't surprised; to his people, their Function was their family, their sex life, and their reason for existing. He rubbed noses with the two smaller cats companionably, and then spoke to the Incubators before they all vanished;

– Gentlemen; the Director predicts maximum five thousand years before humanity either advance too far for us to exploit them, or wipes themselves out. I mean to fulfil our quota for that period in the next two thousand years, by any means necessary. I mean to finish this without any more Incubators being sacrificed.–

A/N: Needless to say, I've been rather happy about the interest this story has generated, especially the large number of suggestion for historic Puella Magi.

Thanks to GoldsteinM for his suggestion of Sacagawea last chapter, and his badgering me into covering the two remaining canon Puella Magi next

chapter.

here is a full list of all the suggested Puella Magi I don't expect to include in the rest of the story, to encourage people to write their own stories about these girls. I would really be very happy about someone writing that...

- Helen Keller*
- Marie Curie*
- Calamity Jane*
- Jane Goodall*
- Betsy Ross*
- Emily Dickinson*
- Anne Bonny/Mary Read (two different pirates)*
- Julia Child*
- Rosa Parks*
- Mary Anning (The girl who found the ichthyosaurs fossil)*
- Venetia Burney*
- Sadako Sasaki (Sadako and The Thousand Paper Cranes)*
- Leslie Burke (Bridge to Terabithia)*
- Juliet Capulet (Romeo and Juliet)*
- Sally Ride*
- Marie/Clara (The Nutcracker)*
- Elizabeth Bathory*

- Elizabeth II

***Chapter 8*: Sharbat, Mary and Jane A/N:** *For everyone who didn't do the Tudors in History, Mary I's mother was Catherine of Aragon. That the Church of England was principally established in order to replace her mother as queen with Anne Boleyn, making Mary herself an illegitimate child, can only have increased Mary's opposition to Anglicanism.*

The author does not believe that Islam was actually established by a Magical Girl. A few Arabic/Afghani/Turkish terms are also provided; Ayat: Verse in the Koran

Hadith: Saying of Muhammad

Quorma: Stew

Chadri: Burka

Kismet: Fate

Pulwar: Afghan sword

Afghanistan, 1980s

When Sharbat was young, she wished to be a good daughter. She loved listening to the *Ayats* and *Hadiths* on Fridays, smelling *Quorma* as she cooked it, learning true and interesting things at school. Her father was always shouting at her mother, and her siblings were sometimes ill, but she drew all of it into her heart, because life was precious.

When Sharbat was a little older, an Afghan woman teacher came to the village school. She said that God didn't exist, Sharbat's mother was foolish to wear a *Chadri*, and that Russia was an earthly paradise. Explosions in the hills woke Sharbat up at night. She wanted to throw all the Russians out of Afghanistan

because they'd ruined her country and her childhood just by existing.

When Sharbat was ten, a Soviet convoy was ambushed near the village. A few days later the helicopters roared out of the sunrise, and blew every large house to brick dust and blood. Sharbat heard machine guns through the pain in her ears, and buried herself under a ruined wall. She shouted over the thrashing from above for her father, or anyone else. But she knew no one could hear her, no one would dare to come, and she wouldn't even hear the blast before a rocket from the sky would kill her. She was too frightened to pray, but the White Cat trotted through the barrage to her with a very feline calm. Shabat Wished for someone to see her. She wanted everyone to know what she had suffered, before she died.

Ten minutes later, Shabat wished that her mother and father weren't dead.

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When Sharbat was eleven, she met the Archangel Gabriel. It was in the square of a half-ruined town where she had gone to find food for her siblings and grandmother. Her Soul Gem pulsed faintly, as she looked at the angel in awe.

Its wings were grey like a goose, and beautifully soft. It was wearing a crown, but its face was indistinct; Sharbat couldn't say male or female, but it was beautiful.

"You are Sharbat. The girl who wished to be seen and heard."

"Yes, Sir. Why is my Soul Gem reacting as if you're a Witch?"

"So you don't believe I'm a Witch? I can speak; I have free will and a human mind." (Angels in Islam do not have free will, but no one had told a peasant girl in a tiny village such a thing)

"Are you something like a Witch then? Do you fight them as well? I...only want to live to get my family over the mountains to Pakistan, but I really need a Grief Seed to get there."

"Find one by all means. You'll become a Witch if you don't, you know."

Gabriel smiled kindly at Sharbat's stunned expression, "Yes, Kyubee didn't tell you about that. When Puella Magi are conquered by despair, and retreat into a curse without hope or end, they become Witches. A very few face the blackest truth of the world and do not look away; they become Angels, and retain their minds."

"All the Witches I killed...were girls?" Sharbat trembled in disbelief, "I had to protect my family...but, oh God, it's as bad as the Russians..."

"There is a darkness in every heart; and no escape once it devours the soul, so don't worry about the ones you killed. You survived for a purpose, after all, Sharbat. I want you to tell people about Puella Magi, Witches and Incubators.

And I want you to tell them about Islam."

"Of course! You spoke the Holy Koran to Muhammad, (P.B.U.H.)...but you said angels were... *you* were a Puella Magi?"

"Yes, 1300 years ago. And I Wished for a moral system that would bring perfect harmony between man and God. No one listened to an Ethiopian slave girl, of course, so I persuaded dear old Muhammad to speak for me. But no one listened to him either. A perfect rule for human happiness, and they refused it. What does that say about humans?" Gabriel swept his arm around the ruined houses.

"But...but the Holy Koran came from God! And God's true faith of Islam spread over the whole world..."

"Weren't you listening, Sharbat? I Wished and every jewel-like word of the Koran dropped into my head. The Koran itself is the only god ever revealed to men. I had to interpreting it rather creatively for Muhammad though; or he would never have forced the conversion of Mecca at swordpoint, and the perfect religion would have died in the desert. I believe he might have stretched some points himself about the role of women, probably out of jealousy...the *chadri* wasn't even thought up for centuries."

"No! The unchanged word of God..."

"Sharbat, you've seen your parents scattered across the street where you lived, in eggplant-sized pieces. And you are shocked when I tell you God cares nothing for this world? Yesterday, I watched Muhjahideen put out a Russian soldier's eyes. Do you still believe Islam is a religion of peace? Afghanistan is making something monstrous of it. You can tell the world that it is a lie, and you will save more lives than Puella Magi who has lived."

Shabat bowed her head, with hopeless tears falling down. At last, she wiped her face and stared at the angel with her unforgettable eyes, clear as the sea.

"If I say this...do you think any true Muslim will lose faith? Will they be happier, if I take their hope away? Yes, my parents died, and I could've saved them...but I have brought my family over a wasteland full of mines and Russians because of God, and His *Kismet*. All this war, all my suffering and Islam itself have a purpose in destiny, and I will trust God to the end. However His Word came to men, it has given me hope, through everything."

"So you're another incurable idiot. And helpless." At Gabriel's words, the strength dropped out of Sharbat's limbs and she fell down. As the angel moved closer, she raised her head.

"What about you then, Witch? You wouldn't have made such a Wish if you hadn't believed in God from the start; but now you only believe in cruelty. You had a wonderful message, but when some foolish men didn't listen, it hurt your pride. Even when Muhammad believed, and the people of Medina, it wasn't enough. You might think you have free will, but you're obviously a prisoner of your own pride and sin!"

The Angel's face contorted—in a second, Sharbat had leapt up, her curved *pulwar* springing into her hand. In a beautifully embroidered red cloak and scarf that covered her completely, she hacked into the angel's chest. It was the strongest Witch she'd ever fought, with crushing fists, bone snapping wings, and the terrible power of its voice. Sharbat was left bleeding and throbbing with pain, but clutching a Grief Seed the size of a duck egg.

When Sharbat was twelve, she got her Wish.

London, England, 1554

Even if she was Queen, a Puella Magi had to hunt Witches. And there was no place in London, except the brothels and hospitals, which drew them more often than the Bloody Tower. Mary had followed her Soul Gem through a spool of shadowed corridors when the signal instantly died, and a door clicked shut at her back.

"My dear Jane. I truly meant to spare your life."

"And you *are* queen. However, I always knew that Edward was asking me to die when he made me his heir. You were next in line—no one upheld me except self-seeking panderers. But I understand now that your poor brother named me Queen so I could kill you justly."

Her red skirt and cloak rustled ominously, as Mary faced the cousin she had imprisoned as a usurper. She held a Spanish-style rapier at her side and wore a leather fencing tunic.

"I'd been doing this for years when you were born, Jane. Can you believe your strength is more than mine?"

Jane Grey wore a plain white dress, and held a straight sword. She was as small and pale as Mary, but fairer. Her lips and eyes might have been fire, and her gaze was as stony as the tower itself.

"God is my strength and nothing else. As a free soldier of the Lord, and for England's true faith, I cannot fear you or submit."

"Like a heretic and foolish woman, you take your frustrated desire for God's will. A soul apart from the church cannot live for Him alone in its own strength!"

"I imagine Our Lord would have seemed alone to you when the Pharisees pronounced His death. But the Father was always His witness, and His Spirit is always with me. I can only pity your majesty for never knowing his unearned

Grace, and surpassing peace."

Mary's eyes stabbed at Jane, as she stepped forward. Jane's smile was uneasy, but determined

"I have trusted God for 15 years that I would lead England back to his Catholic Church. I never invented doctrines, but lived on faith! And God has confirmed my path by equipping me with miraculous power, to fight. Here I stand; I cannot be moved."

"We have power—but our wishes are opposite. This is perhaps, a trial by combat, then. Shall we discover which of us serves the Lamb of God, who gave his life for the truth? And which other has sold her soul for power to the prince of lies?"

A trace of self-doubt crossed the Queen's face—as Jane leapt forward, Mary lunged too early and barely dodged the return blow. With a lighter weapon, she pushed Jane back by threatening to slip through the edges of her guard. Jane easily warded every thrust at her body, and struck heavily in return. Mary realised too late that she was sweating, and Jane seemed barely exerted.

"Shouldn't you call for guards, your majesty? Or some Catholic exorcist, perhaps? You said you'd do anything to keep hold of your kingdom..."

"You *were* a Queen yourself, weren't you, not just a child with sceptre of straw?"

"I'm going to beat you here, myself."

For a moment, Jane thought her enemy was moving fast enough to affect her vision. She was striking fast, but with twelve swords, shining with flame and stabbing freely through air. Blood spread over the white dress—Jane struck wildly around, and jumped back.

"I cannot give in," Breathing hard, Mary advanced on Jane, "For the sake of my mother, who was put aside for a whore by your Anglican church. For peace with Europe and for my dear Phillip, for my children who will rule

England in God's name. Whatever you Wished for, you must submit to your Queen or die!"

Jane launched herself past Mary with a burst of magic, striking at her side in the narrow corridor. As Mary ducked away to gain distance for a strike, Jane stabbed at her with angelically grim devotion. Sliding under the volley of swords, as two slashed through her chest, Jane sank a kick into Mary's stomach and threw her back.

"Of course, you have people you care about," She gasped, "Your reasons. I just had God. So I Wished never to stop believing in Him, to the end. I cannot submit."

Blood flowed from Jane's mouth as she brought her sword against her Soul Gem and focused her energy. Mary estimated the explosion, and realised she wouldn't make it clear. Her face slowly relaxed, and she spoke gently.

"Jane, God forbids suicide. Aren't you afraid?"

"I Wished so I would never be afraid. Even if my soul is damned, England must be free..."

"I think you're wrong Jane, but I don't believe you've sold your soul, any more than me. What we know of God is small, and our belief is our own. If our wishes matter to God, we aren't fighting for Him, but for ourselves."

Soul Gem glowing with deadly energy, Jane stared at Mary's calm face;

"No. I must believe the truth, because I can't stop believing..."

"Remember what you know, Jane No Christian martyr ever struck at her enemies as she died. As Queen I may have to kill many, and I don't know if I will be damned for it. But you didn't make that Wish so you could kill—you wanted to die in the place God meant, and be remembered. Have faith in Him."

Jane's Soul Gem dimmed. She slowly got up, wounds closing, with a smile not lacking in hope.

"I can still fight. Please, Mary...let me fight you with the rest of my strength."

A week later, her Soul Gem almost completely corrupted, Jane Grey was executed.

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Hampton Court, England, 1558

"You tried, sister Mary. You gave your life so England would be Catholic for five years. You would have been happier if you had Wished for a son, or for King Phillip to return your love."

Elizabeth held Mary's head in her hands as the spasms wracked her body, expression unreadable. Mary gripped her blackened Soul Gem, and talked to retain her grip on sanity.

"I Wished as a Christian, and a Queen. Did you want nothing so strongly when the White Cat came to you, Liz?"

"Nothing I would be owned for. As Queen, I will do what I think right, and take everything I may have in my own strength. That is the way of kings."

"Then you will be...a good Queen. You will live longer than I, with more glory. Yet, I believe Jane Grey suffered less than I have in these past years, by dying so young. Perhaps before the end you will suffer more than us both."

Epilogue: 2028, New York

"...yeah, I'm holding up. Keeping myself busy going through Dad's attic."

"You weren't throwing anything away, were you?"

"The life's work of Steve McCurry? I need the space, but there's practically nothing I can get rid of. There *were* these notes on Sharbat Gula..."

"The Afghan Girl? You Dad's Mona Lisa, the most recognised face in history?"

That's something you can possibly do without?"

"It's written like an interview with her, but it's more like a sci-fi novel. Weird stuff about an alien conspiracy to give little girls magic powers and use them to fight monsters...could be allegorical? I can understand why Dad never published it...but it seems he never threw it out either."

"Maybe I can take it for you; I know a guy who might like it. You heard of Billy Kane?"

"Him? Yeah, I guess he's the only one who would give this stuff a second reading."

A few minutes later, a phone rang in a Bristol attic. A computer was beside it, with photos and drawings of girls tacked round the monitor. Marylyn Monroe.

Amelia Earhart. Joan of Arc.

A thin, dark arm answered the phone, and a thin young man with dark hair down to his waist listened to the caller. Pearl white teeth cracked a grin.

"I'm on the next flight to New York, mate—and Peace Be Upon Sharbat Gula. I finally know what I'm going to die finishing."

***Chapter 9*: Anne Frank pt 1**

Amsterdam, September, 1942

Dear Kitty,

Last night, we struck our first blow against the enemy (Not just our enemy as Jews, but everybody's). It came off very well, though I nearly messed things up by not properly knocking my guard out. Even with magic strength, it's really difficult. Thankfully, Sarah got us to cut the phone line in

advance, and cleaned up the rest very well. I don't know what they'll tell their commanding officer!

Then there was a dreadful moment when most of the families held for deportation didn't want to escape, because they had nowhere to go. I almost threw a fit, but Sarah made a frank and pointed speech that got most of them out. She really is a brick. Debbie was the same as usual, but we could see she was happier than anyone...

"Listen! All the Jews held in the Dutch Theatre escaped yesterday!" Anne reflexively shut her diary, as Mr Frank's whisper penetrated from the next room.

"Was it British Commandoes, or God Himself?" Mr Van Pels' irritated voice,

"It sounds like another crazy rumour."

"I *know*, but Kugler heard it from every soul he met this morning." Kugler was owner of the pectin dealer's offices behind which the Frank and Van Pels families lived in hiding. News from the Holland beyond four back rooms and an attic, barring German radio stations, only came from him and his colleagues.

"If it is true, then, where could so many hide?" Van Pels went on, "Reaching the border is impossible—they'll be recaptured in days, without helpers."

Anne felt like she was choking. Even with magic, their best efforts had amounted to releasing the prisoners onto the street to shift for themselves. They couldn't forge usable fake passports or papers, and not another family could've

fitted in the Annex, much as Anne might wish for it.

"Ach, haven't they been helped already? If even a single family is saved, they will thank God for it!" Frank responded, before storming away.

Dear Kitty. My Papa is the most wonderful, darling man in the world...

"When are you going to show me that, Anne?" Anne's father had left the dining room, and crept up behind her—Anne clapped the diary shut again.

"Never, if I can help it, Papa. I heard you talking about...the theatre."

"Isn't it the first good news you can remember, Anne? Still, the Germans will be running around like bluebottles...no loud noises for the next week, alright?"

Something cold rose in Anne, and she hugged her father to hide her eyes. She wanted so much to be his good little girl—but she was a Puella Magi. And a fugitive from the field-grey overlords of Europe—but it was only her own choices that made her lie to her family every day.

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"...the Nazis took power because the Germans gave it to them—they have been enemies of the Jews from before Luther. They lost all morality and trusted thugs to restore their honour and pride. They can only pray that God will not burn with anger forever, but show them mercy."

"That's a pretty generalisation—the Nazis deceived the people, and persecuted thousands of gentiles who opposed them. A country needs more than prayer—

after the war, there has to be representative democracy without rule-by-decree clauses; a free press, guarantee of rights and social justice. Or the next war will happen for the same reasons as this one!"

"Weimar Germany had all your socialist golden calves, but it did not honour God, or help the poor of Germany, and it fell. 'There is a way that seems right to man, but the Lord examines the heart'. Unless God puts mercy and love in human hearts, no politics can help anyone."

A German patrol had stopped in the darkened street ahead, searching a house for contraband they could extort. Sarah, Debbie and Anne were crouched behind a wall nearby, telepathically arguing politics to pass the time.

Sarah was a tall, dark-eyed beauty whose accent betrayed her un-socialist background of privilege; she was eighteen, and the token Dutch Jew. She had planned out the attack on the theatre; Debbie had been the insistent spirit behind it. She wore square glasses, heavy plaits and dark clothes; Anne suspected her father was a Rabbi. Debbie was a little older than Anne, but could act like she was older than Moses.

" Look," Sarah was telling her, "What are the Law and Prophets, if it isn't defending widow and orphan?"

" Don't go quoting the law when you don't even believe in God!"

"Well, n o, but I care that you and Anne believe! I told you before, Socialism isn't Communism—religion has a place in society."

"O ne where it isn't any bother, you mean? Before the war started—"

" By the time you've finished, the war might have ended," Anne quipped, "Or shall we save time and say the first of you to depose Hitler wins the argument?"

Sarah and Debbie caught Anne's eye, then each other's, and covered their mouths to keep from laughing. Compared to them, Anne was very much the baby girl and joker of the group; it was a role she wasn't entirely dissatisfied with.

" Shh! I heard something." Sarah's Contract had given her superior sight, hearing and Witch detection; Anne kept as quiet as a mouse. Debbie tried to stifle an embarrassing yawn; her considerable learning had come at the expense of stamina. " Yes, it's a woman crying. Near the canal...she could be a Witch victim. If we take Willemstraat and run, we can be there in time. Game for one last round, Debbie?"

" Hmph! 'Even youths grow faint, but the Lord renews their strength'. You won't be missed at home will you, Anne?" Anne flushed and firmly denied that she would be. She knew Debbie meant well, but normally liked Sarah a lot more.

Anne had let slip that she had family, but Sarah had insisted that neither of the others should know where they were hiding, in case the worst happened.

Likewise, Anne didn't know the other Puella Magis' hiding places, or even their Wishes. She suspected they were hiding alone, from the way they talked so much whenever the Musketeers met.

(Effie had wanted them to be called the 1st Amsterdam Magical Action Group, while Debbie had insisted on Jael's Hammer. As the mascot character, Anne had finally received naming rights)

At a run, the Musketeers came up to *Willemstraat*, just as a soldier hurried out. All of them shot back against the wall; they had no cover, but the German rushed past to catch up to his patrol without stopping.

"Thank you, God..." Debbie breathed. Anne saw that a purple mist was already flowing from her Soul Gem. Her Contract had given her the power to hide people; it had saved the Musketeers no few times before.

The girls set off again, speeding up as their Soul Gems reacted to a Witch.

Debbie was muttering a prayer with the intense joy of a child in her mother's arms. Sarah grinned at Anne, and it was easy to grin back. Even if they were compelled to hunt Witches and free Jews, under the German nose. Three girls with nothing in common but blood and magic. More and less than friends.

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"There are some incredible rumours about the Dutch Theatre escape. That the Jews were spirited away by angels, or American superheroes. Now this week, a squad taking Jews to the railway was attacked."

"Yeah, we did all that. The more the merrier, if you want to join us."

Fronted by Sarah, the Musketeers were sitting around a cavernous warehouse by the main canal, meeting with Amsterdam's two gentile Puella Magi. Lies'

(Hannalies) shortness and rather child-like lion costume were offset by her determined expression. Effie, whose costume seemed mainly frills, hid behind her in silence.

"It can't go on. The Germans are swarming all over the country; hunting for Witches after curfew is going to get impossible."

"Not at all; the Germans will be too busy chasing a few hundred Jews to bother with Dutch children—the Dutch Resistance should find its job much easier too.

Can't you hunt Witches in the daytime, anyway?"

"I have school during the day," Sarah's face was indescribable, "Not that your group are leaving any Witches; you're hunting Familiars aren't you?"

"You mean *you aren't*?" Anne felt proud of Sarah, and of the look in Debbie's eyes as well.

"...anyway, your skillset is so good that me and Effie can't get Grief Seeds. We haven't got travel passes to get to other cities, but for you two —" Indicating Sara and Debbie, "—there's nothing holding you in Amsterdam. You could stow away on a train or something."

Debbie interrupted before Sarah blew her top, "Miss Lies, we cannot flee from Amsterdam while our people need helpers. Our Torah, and your own bible, say that God blesses those who help the weak and show charity to aliens."

"Aliens? There've been Jews in Holland for centuries and they've never been persecuted. I know the Germans have been hard on you, but everyone suffers in war. You shouldn't cast yourself as victims to get special privileges."

"I may be Dutch," Sarah responded through gritted teeth, "But Anne and Debbie came from Germany. Ran from Germany, in fact, ahead of a major superpower that wants them and their families under the Polish countryside with a bullet in the head!"

"I told you, this isn't Russia—how could the Germans kill so many? If the Jews aren't being deported to labour camps as they say, show me some proof."

"You complacent little...middle-class..."

"Don't get angry, girls" Anne put a hand on her friends' shoulders, "Just put this ignorant child over your knee and spank her, Sarah. Then we can be about our own business."

"Jolly good idea," Sarah stood up, fists clenched, "You other three *goyim* at the back can come out as well."

Three other Puella Magi duly emerged behind Lies, weapons drawn.

" *Meshuggah*. " Debbie stated, "Demons and Nazis fill the streets, and we're fighting each other."

"You prepared this," Sarah glared at Lies, "For nothing but territory and pride, like any battle at all. Only you got help from other cities, because you're all too terrified of the Nazi to let us save our people from death."

"All of us gave up our lives to fight Witches. We won't let you set the Germans hunting for us; it's too much."

"So you're five against three?" Anne commented, "Is that the famous Dutch courage?"

As Lies drew her sword, Sarah kicked her chair into the girl's face; as it shattered against her weapon, Sarah transformed. A skin-tight blue suit flashed over her body; a red cloak burst from her shoulders like wings. As the two Dutch girls behind Lies flinched away, Sarah leapt over the lion girl's head to swing with fists and feet.

As Lies reacted, Debbie went for her. Her clothes had become an ankle-length white dress with a black cloak and headscarf beneath a crown. Her two short-swords weaved an untraceable path. Lies clashed with her,

hammering her sword on Debbie's guard. Anne could see she was a strong fighter, but another girl in

green was charging her with a sword, and she'd never dreamed she would have to fire at a human face.

Quickly, Anne summoned the gorgeous red dress covered in frills and sequins, and a musket. She got off a hip-shot at the last minute, making the Dutch girl leap aside. Something hit her arm; Anne was shocked to see an arrow sticking out and Effie preparing another shot from the rear of the warehouse.

Anne smiled. The adorable overbite that had disturbed the heart of so many boys in her schooldays, aided by the magic of her Wish, affected Effie much as if a spotlight had gone off in her face. Meanwhile, Anne quickly summoned two more flintlocks. The swordmaiden attacked much faster, but Anne surprised both of them by driving a musket butt into the girl's stomach. Then she quickly shot her to the ground, fired again from panic, and dived behind a crate to avoid Effie's renewed volley. She summoned a fourth musket, and they began trading shots.

Sarah used magical strength to fight barehanded; her straights and hooks were clearly beating her two opponents down, but their resistance was too spirited for her to assist Debbie. The Orthodox girl was bleeding from one arm. Against Witches she was terrifying; against a human, Anne knew her heart wasn't in the fight. She was dodging around Lies' longer blade, but barely scratching the lion girl. Her opponent drove her back, savage focus forcing a snarl to her lips. Anne thought of shooting into the fight as Debbie finally stumbled on her dress, and Lies leapt forward to smash her into the floor.

In midair, the Lion girl seemed to come apart at her joints like a bloody doll.

As the Dutch girl behind her turned, Sarah kicked her across the warehouse into a wooden crate. Lies hit the floor, close to screaming, as Debbie adjusted her dress and spun on her heel.

"Your pain-denial and bloodlust forced the wounds to your tendons open.
'The *Tzadik* will rise seven times, but disaster brings down the wicked'"

Effie dropped her bow and burst into tears. As Debbie strode out of the warehouse, Sarah knelt beside Lies.

"From now on, all of you hunt in other cities. Leave Amsterdam and the Nazis to us. This isn't much between five," To Anne's amazement, Debbie placed a Grief Seed before Lies' eyes, "But it'll let you heal up, and get back to slaying Witches. You've seen we'll defend ourselves by fighting, but I don't believe problems are resolved that way. That's why I fight like this, you see? We're a religion of peace, if you give us a chance."

"Sarah...that was incredible." Anne stammered as they left, "You're the real *Tzadik*—" Sarah put an arm around her shoulders, and Anne felt the flutter in her chest that came when she thought about Peter.

Outside, Debbie was facing away, towards the canal. Anne felt a chill, as she saw her face was wet.

"I...wasn't skilled enough to strike her core without killing her. To preserve human life, I had to do *that*...I'm so sorry—"

Sarah put her arms around Debbie and held her. Almost on tiptoe, the smaller girl sank into her neck.

"You did nothing wrong, Debbie. You were a little hero. Fighting with you is a blessing."

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"Anne, these are brilliant!" After lying awake in agony, Anne had copied a few pages from her diary, and shown them to Sarah and Debbie.

"Lucid in every description. It might be Rabbi Isserles' *ha-Mapah*, or ' *The Count of Monte Cristo*'."

" *Huh?*"

"I believe I'm permitted to read beyond the scriptures?"

"Just couldn't think how you found the time. Seriously, Anne, as Holland's first female premiere, I want you writing my memoirs."

"I'd vote for you," Debbie said quietly, as the other girls laughed, "So long as it's premiere of Israel."

"Anyway," Anne spoke up before her friends' old Zionism vs Internationalism debate kicked off again, "I never thought I'd show these to anyone. But I heard the government-in-exile on the radio, appealing for ordinary people's accounts of life in wartime, and crimes by the Nazis. I thought, since you both read so much, you could show me how to make it better..."

Anne wondered if there were other reasons. She felt closer to Sarah and Debbie than any other friends; but almost in the same way she was close to Kitty. Her secret war outside the Annex was more a dream than anything comparable to the rest of her life.

"Anyway, the Nazis will be too alert for us to act again right away. Next week, but no sooner."

"I suppose you're right," Debbie stood up, "Our duty to cleanse the city of *Dyubbuks* is almost as important."

"Debbie...this is the twentieth century!"

"So I didn't believe such Kabbalist folk-tales myself, until I saw night-fiends walking the earth, possessing innocents! How can you still deny the spiritual powers—?"

Anne smiled. The Annex was so fraught with arguments over every little thing, she that had often thought that the battlefield would hold more peace. Listening to her friends freely chatter back and forth, she'd learnt that some battlefields did.

The Witch they found was a tattered cuddly rabbit. It shot fire from its nostrils and breathed poisonous fumes that nearly choked Sarah before Debbie pulled her back. Glad she could finally let off five muskets at once with magic, Anne bombarded the Witch into immobility, as Sarah leapt into the air and crushed it under her feet.

"You're really improving, Anne," Sarah commented, as they crept away from the deserted house, "Honestly, you've got talent, cuteness...you're in hiding with a dishy boy..."

"I—I never said Peter was dishy!"

"No, but you've gone red..."

"Ah, a love story!" Debbie's smile was infuriatingly beatific, "From the look in your eyes, he must resemble Rudolph Valentino—"

"Alright, when did *you* ever see—?"

"I...I thought *Four Horsemen* was a scriptural movie! Actually, Papa didn't approve, so I had to sneak into the cinema...it was worth it, though." Now Debbie was blushing.

As Sarah teased out Debbie's scandalous teenage crush, Anne followed them in silence. She'd opened her diary to them both, and felt quite enraged that they'd teased her about it. The bad mood continued as she parted from the Musketeers, expecting to walk three streets alone before sneaking back into the Annex via a second-floor window facing onto the hidden courtyard.

Two soldiers were leaning against a house on the first street.

Anne shrank back around the corner, exposure crawling on her skin. She doubled back to hide in an alley that emerged near her home; but Anne feared the Gestapo's worst tortures less than the chance of betraying her family to their enemies. The soldiers were obviously an idling routine patrol. Anne broadcast her situation to Debbie and Sarah, on the offchance they were in range, and sat tight. She could hear the German voices; her native language, though she was glad to speak Dutch better.

"...she says the boy's school report couldn't be better; he'll get a better job than *this* after the war. Anyway, I heard Dortmann's section liberated a barrel of pre-war lager this afternoon?"

"Tch! It is beer, but to German beer, nothing at all. Thank God we're not in France!"

"Or Russia." dry laughter, "Or Poland. All those Yids...are they really going to labour camps?"

"For all we know. That end is nothing to do with us..."

In her anger, Anne must have drawn in a breath; the voices stopped. As heavy boots plodded towards the alley mouth, she backed around the corner, moving quietly into the open street—but so slowly that the second soldier had already circled the block. As she emerged, he seized her arm.

"Hans, it's a *madchen*! She looks like a Jew—!"

Too scared to transform or even scream, Anne stared into the soldier's bleary eyes. She saw them go suddenly wide, as a sword stabbed through his back, and came out with a noise like a snake in mud.

Hans rushed around the corner, Mauser raised. He faced Debbie, her eyes blazing white through her glasses as she dared him to try and shoot her. He tried, and she slashed; a shout died in his ruined throat as he crumpled.

"...what..." Sarah ran up, staring at the bodies, "You could have knocked them out, you could have hidden yourself and Anne...they were humans..."

"They were Nazis." Debbie spoke quietly, "And it was self-defence."

"You stabbed him in the back!"

"No, it was self-defence," Anne found her voice, "He was a Nazi, and she was a Jew."

"Oy vey, oy vey, I don't believe this." Sarah moaned as they carried the bodies towards the nearest canal, "You're a child, Anne—it's obscene to hear

you justify killing! And Debbie, what happened to the sixth commandment?"

Debbie seemed to be in a daze, absently wiping blood off her glasses with a handkerchief.

"Remember what Amalak did you, how he attacked you when you were faint and weary, and did not fear God. You shall blot out the memory of Amalak from under heaven; you shall not forget."

"Oh, for...forget I asked."

"Sarah, you're smart, but you're not God, and we're not children—at least, this isn't a children's game were you make the rules! Debbie killed these men to save me; and for all the suffering they've caused, they deserved what they got." Anne stared at Han's open mouth, and fiercely tried to forget the son, "Don't you realise we're at war—?"

"They are war with us; we are only protecting our people!" Sarah threw the body aside and looked Anne in the eye, "Those deaths were needful to save you, but I will never say death is right. I will never lose you to a cycle of violence—

we *are* all children, and we can't imagine how terrible it can get. And when the war ends, will we crush races in turn, for what they did or may do to us? I would rather put a gun to my head!"

"I don't think we could become like them." Debbie spoke up, still quiet, "When the Stormtroopers beat kill Jews in the street...can you imagine them debating whether they're right or wrong, like this? It seems that Jews never stop thinking, however painful it is."

... we finished in silence, and went home. Anne wrote to Kitty the next day, I know exactly what Debbie means, and I think she's right. So long as we keep thinking, searching and trying to live rightly, there is hope for all of us.

"Ah, God..."

"Don't let the girls hear you. *Forty*?"

"Twenty hostages for each dead soldier. Rabbis, Professors, Editors, Lawyers...the best left in Amsterdam."

Anne's head swam, as she heard her parents through the door. She felt like she was falling into a nightmare; there would be no going back and no awakening.

Crawling through the window that night, she rushed to their meeting place recklessly. Sarah and Debbie were waiting in an old cellar looking grim.

"...I talked to Lies already." Sarah was saying, "She asked if we would be worried about Dutch hostages."

"What can we do?" Anne wailed, "Couldn't we...?"

"No. They'd never believe we killed those soldiers. Unless we showed them our powers, and spent our lives being dissected in a lab to make super-soldiers."

Anne felt rather sick.

"That's it then." Debbie's voice was fearfully calm, "We have to attack the Nazi Command."

"No. The guards there are nothing like the theatre; Anne's Soul Gem is dim, and yours is nearly spent. Anyway, we could never get forty people out of there, without a massacre—"

"That's right. You were right that rescuing people is difficult, but killing Nazis is much easier. To save innocent people, isn't it needful to kill as many of them as we have to? If it were twenty for every Jew they've killed, it would be bare justice."

"And then? They'd send flamethrowers and tanks from Germany. The police and Resistance have no guns and there are three of us. They would

level Amsterdam and kill by hundreds. You know they would, Debbie, so calm down *now*."

Anne thought about her family, blasted in their home by a shell, or dragged from the Annex and kneeling outside to be shot. It was too terrifying to face alone.

"You're right, Sarah. We can't."

"You're worse than Lies. You're both betraying your people. Do you celebrate Purim every year and not know what it means? The Nazis will exterminate us, unless we fight back, and wipe out all our enemies first...!"

Without speaking, Sarah turned from Debbie, and walked out of the cellar. Anne stared at the Orthodox girl's utterly stricken and wretched face, before scurrying after her.

"You should go back in there. She might..."

"She knows we can't save the hostages." Sarah looked away, "I don't know what I can do for her now."

"You could say you forgive her. And that you're sorry. And tell her what she means to you."

"I don't know what..." Carried away by urgent feelings, Anne clung to Sarah's arm, and put her hand on the older girl's heart.

"Life. We can't save everyone...but only by surviving together, and saving each other from the enemy, we can resist."

When they went back in, Debbie had vanished.

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Sarah and Anne were almost sure Debbie would attack the Nazis alone, but they heard nothing of it. Within the twenty-four hours, two Dutch saboteurs who had been in hiding for months confessed to the double murder. The Gestapo promptly hung them, and let most of the Jewish hostages go.

The next night, Sarah worked out where Debbie hiding place had been—it turned out to be an empty coal cellar. A small pile of spiritual literature and paperback classics was the only furnishing, with covers almost worn away.

The third night, they found Debbie, staring down from a bridge. Her Soul Gem was hidden in her hand.

"Debbie, we've been looking for you." Anne spoke first, "Come back down. Please."

"Rabbi YomTov of Joigny stated that suicide to escape forced conversion is Lawful. Even *now*, the Law is light to my feet...even now, I cannot follow it."

"Look at *yourself*, Debbie. I know you're a good girl; whatever you said back then you didn't mean and would never do. I just got scared of it, and lost control; I'm sorry for everything. Come back. I can plan, but I don't know if it's the right thing or wrong without you. You're the soul of the team."

"Sarah...I sold my soul. Unclean, useless...I want to kill every Nazi in the world, but I'm not strong enough, and it's wrong..."

"What did you want at first?" Anne burst out, "What did you make a Wish for, Debbie?"

Debbie smiled wanly; it seemed to her and Anne that would stay sane for as long as she kept speaking

"I think Papa wanted a boy. He had me learning the Torah and Talmud before I could read German...I learnt everything; I always loved to read. So many books, so many words from God—'worth more than purest gold, sweeter than the finest honey'. I learnt everything about God, and I hoped my father would praise me for it.

"He was a caring man; he spoke against the Nazis when no one else dared.

Then, *Krystalnacht*...they beat the men with clubs, and did abominations.

They burnt our home and every Synagogue, but first they beat Papa. They beat him until he carried the Torah, the Talmud and the Commentaries out into the square and burnt them all himself..."

"Debbie, they would've killed him!" Anne insisted.

"They killed him afterwards, anyway, and worse than that. God is God. He *has* to be worth dying for, or what is there in the world? 'I call all day, but you do not answer'...I still prayed, and prayed, for God to wash Papa clean from shame, and hide him in His healing wings. Then the white cat came, and I prayed to it, that my father would go to heaven, whatever he had done.

"You can say it was a foolish miracle, but I couldn't imagine wanting anything else. Now God's people are dying, and all I can do is kill. Father, I'm sorry...you were right, the fool's mouth gushes folly..."

"Debbie, stop it!" Sarah's cry was recklessly loud, "Don't give up, remember who you are—!"

"I'm sorry, Sarah. Remember Amalak, it says. I can't forget."

Debbie fell silent, and Anne saw her will finally buckle. When the whirlwind had cleared away, something was standing on the bridge, with spindle-thin black legs and horns above its twisted face. The Dybbuk Witch's barrier was sound instead of form, as every clause and verse from Debbie's memories wailed out like dying children.

"God. Oh, God. The grinning little bastard..."

Sarah dropped to her knees. Anne's Soul Gem was anchor-weighted, pinning her down. Facing a Witch that had been human, Anne didn't expect herself to move as it tore them both to pieces.

She finally realised the Dybbuk wasn't moving. Its bestial features were filled with less bloodlust than agony.

"Debbie?" The red eyes rolled around her like trapped ferrets, "Oh! She's still fighting! She's holding on!"

"Not even human, you're still thinking? Still trying to do right?" Sarah sank further down, "Only you could do it, Debbie...I can't kill you, I'm sorry."

"It's alright." Five muskets lined up above Anne's head. "We're soldiers. It has

to be done."

The thing that had been Debbie faced the firing squad, holding itself still. Anne was sure there was gratitude beneath the terror in its eyes. Sarah stood up, showing Debbie her tears.

"Hear, Oh Israel..." She got out.

"...the L-Lord your God. Is one."

Anne brought all five hammers down.

Amsterdam, March, 1944

The American Pilot took another swig from her coffee-flask, and glanced across at the Musketeers. They were meeting in an abandoned house; the deportations had left them everywhere. She seemed in her forties, wore a sheepskin jacket, and had a gap toothed smile that seemed both humble and dashing.

"Wars always made Puella Magi. When a girl understands that her world can be lost in an instant, she'll take any out. Now, thousands of girls are heading to Poland. Dozens of Contracts; and when they see the Death Camps, they turn Witch overnight. Then those Witches fly back to their homes everywhere in Europe and Russia, like cremetorial smoke. Most girls on the Continent are barely coping, but you're doing better than anyone in the West. You're strong, and you fight for your people, not just yourself. I'm here to tell you about operations on a wider front."

"I'll do anything, so long as it ends the war. Anne has family though."

"Sarah, I'm not hiding behind my family when I've lied to them. We're both ending the same way."

Sarah's face darkened, and Anne looked down. They both felt they had to spend their lives in the greatest effort possible, rather than wait to be overtaken by Debbie's fate.

In a year, Anne had grown a little taller and quieter; her smile was more knowing, but still lit her face up when it came. Sarah was slightly wearier around the eyes, but otherwise the same as ever. After Debbie's end, they had done what they could to warn the Jews, protect the ones in hiding, and rescue as many as they could, without more reprisals. They had even stopped the deportations for a month by burning the Gestapo's record of Jews in Amsterdam, but the triplicate records had presently come from Germany. Shortly after that the Witches had become so many that they'd done nothing but hold the line against them for months.

(Anne had asked Sarah how she could kill Witches, when they'd all been girls with a Wish. Sarah had said that she had to think of them as mercy deaths. She had to remember Debbie, every time.)

Lies hadn't believed them about Witches, until Effie had become one; three Puella Magi were barely enough, so Lies was hunting in Amsterdam again since then. Since the invasion of Italy, the American Pilot had shown up twice, flitting all over Europe to link up what Puella Magi could be gatherer, and even distribute enough Grief Seeds to hold things together. She had obviously known where Witches came from before the Musketeers told her, and they didn't believe that she was spreading the word.

Anne couldn't really blame her. There'd been times since knowing the truth, when she'd felt like a Golem. A girl made of clay, without a soul or a family.

Marching on to defend the people of God, without an end she could bear to imagine.

"If you're in, I have some good news. The Red Army has taken Kiev; Roza , Sasha and Kalya are defending them from the Witch attacks that nearly lost

Stalingrad. They'll get to the camps first, but if Uncle Sam has anything to say, Holland will be liberated much sooner. Can't give you the date, but it's almost ready." The Pilot grinned recklessly; simply by looking at her, Anne felt her spirits revive, "There are some...gremlins in the engine, though. Firstly, the city of Bremen in Germany, last month. The Nazis and Allies are calling it a raid, and all the survivors were forcibly resettled. I didn't fly too close, but the centre was a pit, and something was in there. Big, black and screaming."

"...a Nazi weapon experiment?"

"One of the Bletchley Park girls in England sends me the decoded German transmissions. They're talking about a huge Kabalistic ritual of Jewish Witchcraft. They're calling it 'Black Sabbath'—would be just fine if that's propaganda, and they haven't a clue about real Witches."

"A Witch that destroyed a city. Oy vey, I shouldn't be surprised. We'll look out for it."

"I'm asking a little more than that. If that thing stays in Germany, we can leave it; if it starts moving west, I'm asking you to stop it with me. Mmes Aubrac and Fourcade, should be with us, along with anyone else I can get. That thing could tip the balance of the invasion if it crosses the channel. Or it could kill more people than every Witch you've defeated—"

"Okay, we're in," Sarah raised a hand, "Maybe the German Puella Magi will kill it, though if the Gestapo starts gathering or studying them, things will really get difficult."

"Oh, I agree. That's why the *Lorelei* project has me getting jittery..."

"Ach! Tell me what that is."

"I don't know; Ruth from Bletchley sent me references, and nothing specific."

But if the Nazis are going to use magic we need to shut that down. I'd like to fly you girls to Essen, in Germany. A Puella Magi turned up there who

might be connected to *Lorelei*. I want you to talk to her, find out what the score is."

"Us talk to her? *Jews*?"

"It seems we're quite a solitary bunch—as a working team, I think you're the best choice to reach out to her. As for the Jewish thing, I hope it counts for more that we're all Puella Magi."

Anne coughed nervously, as Sarah gave the Pilot a rather strange look.

"Everyone would definitely notice if I left the Annex for days on end..."

"Don't worry Anne; it should only take one of us."

"Sarah...are you sure?"

"Don't worry; I'm the pacifist here, aren't I?"

Two days later, Essen, Germany

In a bombed out hotel, Sarah walked down the landing, cloak streaming back.

"I can hear you breathing, Miss Fritz. You're not scared of a Jew, are you?"

An axe smashed through the door beside her. The blow she caught on her forearm would have broken a normal limb. Punching through the ruined door, and diving in, Sarah knocked her attacker down and caught the axe as it slashed up. She strained to hold it, but the blade still ground towards her face, before the German twisted it away, and shouldered Sarah through another door.

She barely leapt away before the axe crashed down.

"Can't you feel that I'm stronger, Jew? I must survive, and you die!"

The Nazi Puella Magi was a chunky blonde in a Viking helmet and leather, with bare arms as broad as cannons. She could have stepped out of

Wagner's opera, or a youth group propaganda poster.

"I admit it; you're stronger. But you've dug your own grave if you believe you can't lose."

The Viking girl charged, with a shrill cry, throwing slashes like a berserker, strong enough to chop Sarah in two. At the last moment, Sarah twisted around her body, and swung a fist back at her hopelessly fervent face. As the Viking's head snapped back, Sarah volleyed punches into her chin and stomach like a heavyweight until she dropped. She threw the axe away.

"There. You were aware of nothing, even your own power—you're a pathetic fighter, you know."

"I'm an Ayrán woman, of the master race...you can't kill me, oh God, please don't..."

Sarah kicked the girl in the stomach to silence her, and squatted down.

"I've got one question for you. Some time ago, I had a talk with a true friend, which I never got to finish. About how this war started, and how a madman like Hitler ever took control of Germany. There's one idea I can't let go...some stupid little girl with yellow braids looked at the state her country was in, and made a *Wish*.

"So, blondie, what was your *Wish*? If you caused this war, and all its death...I really don't see how I can let you live."

A/N: Some Hebrew words; Goyim—non-Jew, Dybbuk—Jewish evil spirit that possesses people, used here to refer to Witches, Tzadik—Righteous person, Oy Vey—Oh woe, ha-Mapah—'The tablecloth' a 15th century Jewish spiritual text, Meshuggah—mad. Identifying all of Debbie's quote from the Old Testament could be worthwhile research project for your holidays! The Amalakites quote is notable for being invoked by a Jewish partisan in the Holocaust survivor Primo Levi's book, If not now, when? which I'd recommend to anyone.

'Hear, oh Israel...' is the Shema or statement of faith Orthodox Jews are supposed to recite before death; here Anne and Sarah recite it in Debbie's place. YomTov was a medieval English rabbi who committed suicide with his congregation to escape being killed by a mob. Krystalnacht was a large riot against German Jews in 1938, where 90 people were killed, and many of their homes and possessions burnt.

Marie Fourcade and Lucie Aubrac were important female French resistance members. Roza Shanina was a Russian ace sniper; two of her less famous friends are also mentioned. Ruth, the Puella Magi working at the Bletchley Park codebreaking project, is named after my own grandmother, who worked

there during WWII.

Debbie and Sarah are respectively named after the biblical Judge Deborah, and the heroine of the Kasuhiro Otomo (Akira) manga 'Mother Sarah'. Debbie's costume was modelled off an illustration of her namesake; Sarah's costume is modelled off Superman, who was, of course, created by a Jewish writer and artist.

***Chapter 10*: Himiko, Kaguya and Sadako Yamatai township, Japan, about 200 AD**

A tall boy plodding between rice fields and watchtowers, with a slight girl on his back. Smoke from palisade walls drifting around the sunset. The guards at the town gate wear red war paint, and sneer at the boy through their beards;

"You should've known a shaman girl was going to enslave you, Genji!"

The boy steadfastly plods on. He finally deposits the girl with a childish face and old eyes in front of a sunken hut. Four bronze bells on the roof are cast with deer and cranes.

"Ouch...try not to break your sandal again, Himiko-Sama. I'm just grateful you've been fasting four days."

"Hmph. A knucklehead who couldn't fast for six hours *should* be grateful."

Genji smiled with embarrassment.

"I guess with three meals a day I'm happy. Good luck with tonight anyway—*Shika-Sama* walk with you!"

"Idiot. I've always been a Shaman and if *Shika-Sama* doesn't know that, I'll tell him. Thanks, anyway." Genji walks away, smiling.

Within the hut, an old woman in a badger-pattern robe motions Himiko to sit.

"You won't be seeing your cousin Genji after tomorrow, Himiko. A shaman lives between man's world and the gods. Get too close to men, and you'll just be a snot-nosed brat with some herbal remedies."

"I'm a shaman because I've never wanted to be with people, Benika-Sama; and I'm not so unlucky that men try to get close to me. Genji's the only one who doesn't mind me reading things he can't."

"Less of that lip, Missy. Give the boy some freedom, understand? In two years, he'll be warrior age, and a kind soul like that won't last through a year's worth of raids. You disagree, girl?"

"...no, Benika-Sama. He is kind, and in two years time there will still be raids.

Battles, wars and miserable deaths that gain nothing. Are men really so stupid?"

"Silly girl. Men, animals, gods—birth, violence and death. Gain the power of blasting life to dust, and you might end human war. But your task is to guide humans in the paths set by fate."

Himiko had purified herself in the lake. Hunger had sharpened her focus and made it harder to hold, but she had trained. From the other side of the fire, Benika was chanting without words, like a heartbeat from the womb.

Her bronze mirror had hung before Himiko's eyes for hours. She had fixed her being on it until her spirit guide *Kitsune-Sama* had stared back.

After interminable time, the top of her head opened up, and *Kitsune-Sama* shone a red light inside. Himiko pushed her way out, glanced back at her own pale face with brief curiosity, and followed *Kitsune-Sama* into the mist-blurred mirror. She stumbled through dull valleys full of eyes, until she found the red fox spirit under a cherry tree, rubbing its face against a white spirit, something between a fox, a cat and a rabbit.

– *Hello Himiko. I'm Kyubey. Do you have a Wish you'd risk your life for? Do you want the power of a Puella Magi?–*

"Shiro-Neko-Sama. Is this a test?"

– *Of a kind. But of course, your fate is already set–*

"Yes. I will set it. I wish to be a queen who rules with wisdom, and brings peace to the land. I have nothing equal to offer but my life, and I give it freely."

– *That's...a rare Wish, Himiko. Few Puella Magi dare to shoulder the happiness of thousands for life. Fewer born queens will give up their rule to a Wish's power–*

"After bargaining with a spirit, I will be a shaman, *Shiro Neko-Sama*. Rulers have brought war and corruption, but I only mean to be a guide."

Her smile was something like Cleopatra's. It distinctly reminded the white cat that he would never understand humans, but he could only complete the Contract.

After her initiation, Himiko spent two months travelling the country, then returned to Yamatai and foretold the Kyushu war. After the death of a princess on a diplomatic visit, the two largest Japanese clans and their allies virtually exterminated each other over two years. In the exhausted endgame Himiko began to travel again, speaking with every clan chief, foretelling

defeats and brokering treaties. In time, the clans realised that they were tired of death and wanted peace. None of them would set a rival chief above the clans, or even deal with old enemies. But all of them obeyed Himiko, the prophetess with *Kitsune-Sama's* wisdom who never failed to foretell the truth. As pilgrims began to flock into Yamatai, Himiko promptly appointed Genji to sort out all their requests.

Since he still liked food much better than warfare, he started preparing her meals as well.

"Did my Wish cause the Kyushu war, *Shiro Neko-Sama*?" In her red robes, Himiko swept across an old battlefield, covered in broken spears and bones,

"Only devastation made the clans desire peace."

– *If that were true, would you regret your choice?*–

"Of course not. You know, most of Benika-Sama's 'magic' was practical psychology and common sense. I only united the tribes by treating them fairly, saving their face, and promptly weeding out incurable fools. Now foreigners whisper that I enslave my own people with spells!"

– *Not without cause. You used that eye to predict the war for example*–

The battlefield dissolved into a forest full of blue fireballs. The eyes of a two-tailed cat loomed above the trees for a moment before crashing down.

Her right eye flashed red—in a moment, Himiko saw everything about the Witch and judged its fate. Skipping aside from the flashing jaws, she thrust her naginata through the roof of its mouth. As the monster rolled in agony, she stabbed into its eye; no third blow was needed.

"When needs must, I have magic. But it feels more like a part of me than power beyond human nature. This isn't something I've become, but what I was always meant to be."

– *That may just be because you're almost the perfect Puella Magi, Himiko*–

The seventy tribes in the Yamataikoku confederation retained their own rituals and customs, but were bound to peace, and all obeyed Himiko. She had never favoured her own people to excess, but the crowds pouring in to seek her wisdom made them rich within the year before it ended.

"Himiko-Sama will make no further prophesies; come back tomorrow." The crowd, heaving and groaning under their travelling bags, did not disperse. Genji raised his voice, "The Prophetess has spend two days in a trance to answer a dispute between chiefs, and you're still bringing questions about the best site for a rice field! Himiko-Sama isn't something for public use; you should show her respect!"

"Respect!" Someone shrieked from the back, "She told my son to get married, and the wretched girl died last week!" A Yamatai guard knocked the old woman down, and the riot lasted the rest of the afternoon.

When Genji finally went to prepare Himiko's evening rice, he had bloody knuckles and a head wound. Himiko insisted on washing the cuts herself, eyes darkened as she worked.

"It honestly hurts worse to turn the really desperate pilgrims away."

"It's their stupidity that hurts me. Without wars, they should have time to fill their heads, but even the men who have brains don't dare use them."

The white cat ran up onto Himiko's shoulder.

— Well, it is the human condition—and you did Wish for a perfect kingdom, rather than a free democracy. Although my own race has no ruler except the common good, I would say that a perfect monarch requires perfect obedience—

In her last public appearance, Himiko gave the people laws. No crime or revenge would be tolerated. Vassals should revere lords, children revere parents and couples respect each other. Everyone should accept the station of their birth, and there would be no shamans apart from hers. Yamataikoku would suffer disaster if it did not follow to the letter.

None of the onlookers could doubt that Himiko held death and life in her hands, as ruler of both men and spirits. Himiko finally stated that she would take hermetic vows.

"The way to establish Yamataikoku forever and the way to escape the torment of war do not lie with men. I will go down to the world of spirits, and find the way; I am prepared to give up breath and the earth for this kingdom."

There were tears on every side and ecstatic cheering. When Himiko's palace and stockade were finished, thousands of people lined the road, dropping flowers before Himiko as if she were going to a living burial, for the people's sake. No ruler had ever had so many servants, or spoken with spirits as an equal; very soon people were calling Himiko a goddess rather than a queen. The people who refused to obey her laws were slaughtered by men fearing divine punishment; something never done for *Kitsune-Sama*, *Shika-Sama* or any other god.

Genji still prepared Himiko's meals and carried her prophecies to the outside.

When he told Himiko about the killing, she turned away with clenched fists.

"Genji. Do you think I'm a bad person?"

"You never seemed a bad person, Himiko-Sama. Even when you call me an—"

"Idiot."

The white cat watched from a wooden statue.

— *And what do you think of yourself, Queen Himiko?*—

"You were right, *Shiro-Neko-Sama*. A perfect queen can only become a god. If we would escape the natural cycle and determine our fates, what other path can a Puella Magi take?"

Himiko gathered her female attendants for intelligence and spiritual strength.

Dozens of them became Puella Magi simply to grow closer to her. The white cat soon realised that she was studying their specialised powers, quickly mastering them all herself, and learning everything about the Puella Magi system. It still couldn't justify letting a single Contract go.

Himiko had privately sent for her Benika to accept a position of honour. Her old teacher had apparently hmped, saying that she had always been a village shaman and was prepared to die one. Some of Himiko's attendants left her palace to guide the people as shamans, while the others protected the land as Puella Magi. Himiko no longer hunted Witches except in her own palace. She owned three robes, living on cold rice, tofu and two Grief Seeds a year.

"At first, I only had insight that made the fate of any creature clear. Now I can glimpse thousands of years into the future."

– And yet you still use a superstitious piece of bronze to focus your mind.

Anyway, in my experience, Puella Magi bear more suffering the more of the future they see–

"That's only natural, if the future really will be like the past."

As Yamataikoku became strong enough to be noticed from the Continent, Himiko sent a large tribute to the Eastern Chinese kingdoms. She listened avidly (through Genji) to the reports of advanced technology, the people's condition, and particularly the long history of dynasties, rebellions, and revival.

"I've done a great deal for you, *Shiro-Neko-Sama*. Now I have something to ask you."

–Does a queen need to grovel to me?–

"For this, I will. The distance between me and Genji...has made life unbearable, since I was born. I want you to make him a Puella Magi."

– *You know the fate of a Puella Magi, Himiko. You'd condemn the man you...?–*

"I know he'll do it. He's too kind, and I'm a selfish witch...but I want him to understand me. I want us to be together in everything, with the same life and death. I could give up food, sleep and life for the kingdom, because all I ever wanted was him!"

– *I refuse Himiko. There is nothing you can offer me–*

"Do you want me to be a prophet to Puella Magi, *Shiro-Neko-Sama*? With what I know, I can turn every one of them against you."

– *Himiko! After uniting a kingdom without violence, you threaten me!–*
Himiko smiled.

"Against proud humans threats accomplish little; but you are nothing except practical. You have something else to lose by uniting Genji and I."

– *Himiko. Since you know everything else I will tell you the last secret. Magic is not something we give to humans, but a power your whole race possesses. And largely suppresses with the entire force of what you call humanity. If this power awakens, every human may become a Puella Magi, and subsequently a Witch. The universe will be condemned and I will have failed*

– *Humans who know Puella Magi often develop weak potential. The rare children of Puella Magi–Ishmael, Achilles, Cain, Jesus–are often great heroes*

or Anomalies. What would the child of two Puella Magi be? Would humanity itself become something different? Rather than take that risk, I am prepared to fully Mindlink with you, Queen Himiko–my sanity will not survive, but neither will yours. I am prepared to die to protect your species. What about you?–

Kyubey grinned up at Himiko, fervently hoping that the threat would be enough. Finally Himiko rose and left. She sat before her mirror for hours, seeing nothing but her dull self-image.

"Himiko-Sama?" Genji was hovering outside when she finally swept out, "Do you want to eat tonight?"

"Genji. Have you ever thought of not calling me Himiko-Sama?"

"I suppose so. But it's your name; yours alone. Himiko-Sama?"

"It's okay. There was something I wanted that was selfish...and it looks like I'm not going to get it."

"Himiko-Sama...I don't think anyone could ever understand you."

"Are you okay with that, Genji?"

"Yes, Himiko-Sama. If things stay this way forever, I'm okay with that."

"Idiot." Tears ran from Himiko's eyes, "Nothing lasts forever."

Shortly after Himiko's debate with the white cat, there was war. Kunu, the second largest Japanese kingdom, began burning fishing boats and raiding towns, with Chinese approval. Despite Himiko's tribute, their land had never had a female ruler. Even if he drank to excess and couldn't spell his own name, King Himikuku of Kunu was someone they understood.

Himiko waived her vow of isolation. After Yamataikoku had destroyed Kunu's ability to make war, three ships crossed the Tsushima strait.

The expedition to Korea was short and very bloody, mostly on the Chinese side. Himiko had decided that killing humans could be as necessary as killing Witches, if you killed enough to make yourself feared.

There were Japanese deaths. And there was Genji's death. He'd probably wanted to shield Himiko, or give his life for somebody else at least, but it was just a random, pointless arrow. As if all her work had been in foreboding of that day, Himiko understood for the first time why war was

terrible. She cursed Benika's soul for predicting the death correctly, and cursed the white cat to the ocean depths. But she was grateful that she was with Genji as he died.

"I'm not going to purify my Soul Gem."

—I'll admit that's good news for me, Himiko, but rather a shame for your kingdom—

"It's not a perfect kingdom. The laws are too restrictive, and I've made mistakes.

After another round of war, maybe someone will build a better kingdom. I'll become a Witch, perhaps dispose of some evil people, and be consumed by another strong Puella Magi. Maybe one of them will have a better Wish."

Himiko smiled at her cloudy reflection in bronze. "Maybe she'll see things clearly. Maybe one day we'll both be free from this circle of hells."

—Without the end of the universe, that will not happen, Himiko—

"Nothing lasts forever, *Shiro-Neko-Sama*. Not even you."

The white cat gazed up at her old, fiery eyes. Even if he had won in every respect, he felt an indefinite foreboding.

Nara, Japan, 10th century AD

"By the power of the Moon, your fate is sealed!"

The white cat wondered idly why Puella Magi were always going on about the

moon, as Kaguya drove her sword into the dragon's titanic flank. With a piteous roar, the Witch that had been Himiko thrashed its body about, and expired.

"Woah! That one was really tough. Still, the Grief Seed looks really big!"

Kaguya laughed, petting the white cat's head as they departed through the forest.

– *One of the strongest. You did well, Kagura*–

"You're too kind, and so cute! Things would be perfect if I could just get a nice peaceful evening with Mother and Father."

– *Then perhaps you shouldn't have wished for beauty to make an emperor love you?*–

Kaguya laughed again. The white cat reflected that even if she had none of Himiko's genius, she had something of the same childish faith and independence. In a few years time, when she would die in a Witch's barrier, and the story would spread that she had gone back up to her true home beyond the earth, he wouldn't be too surprised.

Space Station E1, 1939

– *Directors 11, 12 and 13. Hello*–

The white passage under 9B's paws had the texture of his body; the bio-lining was self-regenerating and a nutritious meal. The Station's control room had a transparent ceiling; stars and darkness peeked in on wobbling organic computers around the walls. In their centre were three frail white creatures, between a cat and a human fetus.

9B's race had used various artificial bodies for millennia. Their original form had been asexually-multiplying amoebae; in spirit they were a race of psychic clones separated by specialization and experience. 9B was a field model; the Directors were the planners responsible for earth.

–9B. You have been summoned to explain recent actions, contrary to our

collective resolve–

It was unheard of for Directors to question workers on the ground; nevertheless 9B preserved his normal calm.

– *My actions have stretched my initial brief, but I judged them necessary–*

–When our most vital resource is at stake, and three of your colleagues have already become insane, questions are in order. Humanity has developed unnecessarily. Scientific thought; even a vestigial collective identity. Permanent struggle at the lowest civilized level was judged the model with lowest risk of self-destruction –

– *But not the highest yield, Director, and your calculations showed no sustainable model. Modern humans finally have the vision to glimpse their precarious, futile cycle. Hope and despair are higher than ever and Soul Gems are larger–*

–Do you expect the developing global war to help that? With one generation since the previous war, a massive hope slump and Soul Gem failure has been predicted –

– *That did happen after the previous war. But in my experience, if humans are not killed by despair, a proportionate upsurge of hope always occurs. If the global war is treated as a single event with the previous one, I respectfully suggest that your calculations may give different results. I would add that pushing humans into a war is simple, but keeping them out of one is simply beyond my power. I also expect great things of the 'total war' involving populations rather than armies, which began to develop in their last conflict. I have recommended 100 times our current deployment, and anticipate working them ragged for the next six years–*

–Your suggestion will be considered. On the offchance that you can explain the material advice you have given to the Manhattan Project.

What is your reason for giving our resource atomic weapons to destroy itself with? –

– *Director...it was not a simple decision. I wanted a way to push humanity to its limits, and finally remembered the prospect that had driven us to use them at first. The threat of total annihilation. The bomb is a risk; but the idea of the bomb will alter the mindset of every single human. Nothing makes them love, struggle and wish so strongly as fear–*

–You have increased the risk of catastrophe to 33.245% during the next earth century, 9B. Why are you so frantic to meet your quota early that you took a risk?–

9B could not feel fear, but realised there was a chance of him being declared insane on the spot. He knew he was right, but knew that all lunatics believe that. Rather than reveal his promise that the quota would be met without more sacrifices, he chose to attack the figures.

– Directors, I have aided a single human atomic project, out of about four already at work. It is probable that they will develop and use a bomb in the final years of the coming war. Without a war, or a demonstration of this obscene primitive weapon, atomic weapons may have been developed and stockpiled by multiple countries, and used en-mass with the next century. Can you please examine the scenario, Directors?–

The bio-computers pulsed–the three Directors had assessed human history and determined its fate within minutes.

–A 21.577% chance of mass atomic weapon development, and a 51.322%

chance of their catastrophic use. Even if you had suppressed all human nuclear research, the result would only be delayed. Apologies, 9B. Have a week's rest in the station lounge and data hub before you Shift back to earth –

– Thank you– With a whisk of its tail and a small sigh of relief, 9B turned to the door.

–One other thing, 9B. Your unfortunate colleagues were all alike in showing unreasonable cruelty to humans before the end, as if seeking destroy the alien minds that were destroying them. If you do start slipping, remember your duty to declare it –

9B remembered 2B. He had been unreasonably harsh, but 9B didn't think he'd hated humans. After 3000 years, 9B himself found it hard not to admire

them at their best; but now he was handing them a weapon to destroy themselves. For the universe, he was certainly have burned on tortured every one of them. But the universe was somehow hard to picture without humans.

Kyubey finally smiled, and trotted on. This had always been the purpose he would spend his life completing. This was the place he was meant to be.

Hiroshima, Japan, 1955

– Hello, Sadako Sasaki. Do you want to make a Contract with me?–

The girl stared up at Kyubey's red eyes, from her bed in the hospital. Her illness showed few visible signs apart from pain and weakness. They flickered in her eyes, like fireflies under a glass.

"You're so white, Neko-Sama. I'll certainly make a Contract. What should I do for you if I get better?"

Her hands moved gently over the lines of an origami crane. The thin bedsheet was covered in cranes, made from wrapping paper, lined sheets, colored card from her classmates. They were as varied and battered as a flock drawn from every country on earth.

– I can grant any wish, Sasaki. In return, you must fight Witches as a Puella Magi–

"Fight Witches?"

– They're monsters born from curses. People need to be defended from them, Sasaki; and I believe you'll be very good at fighting and killing Witches–

Sasaki pressed a hand to her head—the pain had kept her awake so long that she

had seen stranger visions than magic cats. Finally she opened her eyes and smiled.

"I've chosen my wish, *Shiro-Neko-San*. Can you make it so that the bomb that made me ill never hurts anyone else in wars, ever again?"

– *I...can't refuse your Wish, Sasaki, but do you understand your situation? You have terminal Leukemia. Nothing in the universe can save you, except your one Wish. Don't you want to live?–*

"Yes. So much that it hurts. I want to run again, and I want Mama and Papa..."

The little girl struggled over the lump in her throat, "But if I can wish for anything in the world...I can't just use it for me, I *daren't*. I'm sorry I won't be able to fight those Witches...but I just don't feel good about fighting. Maybe there are bad people who hurt others without caring, and it might be right to fight them. I'm just a little girl, and I'm not very smart. But for Granny to die, or children and parents to suffer with no hope...I know that nothing could ever, ever make that right."

White light blazed out from the ward, and faded away. A clear gem dropped into Sasaki's lap. She put it next to the white cat on her dresser, and started folding another crane.

– *Do you...really believe that pieces of paper will heal you, Sasaki?–*

"Mama and Papa smile whenever I finish one, even if they still cry. Besides, you came, didn't you? Maybe one day a white crane will come and bring me a true miracle."

The white cat couldn't feel sadness. He couldn't feel pity, regret or shame for all the people he had sacrificed without becoming insane. But he lowered his head, unable to meet a Puella Magi's eye for the first time in 3000 years.

– *It...would be very good if you were going to get better, Sasaki. I think it is good that I've met you, and fulfilled your Wish–*

The next day, the white cat and a brown cat were sitting outside a ramen store.

The white cat let a passing schoolgirl stroke his head, while noting her Potential, before getting down to business.

– I'm reassigning you to the USA, 230B. You should get on well; Americans have willpower but their imagination is simplistic. 7B is showing signs of cracking; I mean to remove him from the front line into an advisory role. The junior Incubators left over from the WWII boom could use his experience–

– Very good, 9B. But who'll have responsibility for this country? –

– 10B and some of the juniors will handle routine work in the major cities. I will deal exclusively with selected cases in Japan–

–I don't follow your logic, 9B. As the most skilled Incubator, you've always dealt with major cases globally–

Kyubey smiled as he watched the crowds pass by.

– So skilled that it took me near 2000 years to see the significance of this country, 230B. Everything from Incubators to a cockroach strives for life. Only humans, with all their self-seeking emotions, have leant to die with a smile.

The Japanese can accept the natural cycles and never stop reaching beyond them. The most modern nation, where gods and dreams go to die, and the people strain towards oblivion. But they have the will to face the final human truth; hope really is worth dying for. I believe our quota will finally be met by a Japanese Puella Magi–

***Chapter 11*: Anne Frank pt 2**

Amsterdam, March 1944

Late at night, Sarah and Anne marched the Nazi Puella Magi through the streets. Every time Sarah's hearing caught a patrol within earshot, Anne aimed her rifle. She wasn't prepared to shoot a girl one year older than herself, but they had to discourage her from screaming, or anything.

" Her name's Bertha Burgdorf. Apparently, her Wish was to be healed of Multiple Sclerosis, and she barely heard anything about the Lorelei project before she deserted the German army. We're going to hold onto her, until the Pilot finishes contacting Allied Puella Magi and comes back."

" You mean...confine her here?" Anne glanced doubtful at the ornate but derelict townhouse they were pushing the Nazi Puella Magi into.

"Oh, it's quite the prison. I grew up here, so I should know."

Leading the other girls into a dining room from which portraits and silverware had clearly long been looted, Sarah uncovered a floor safe under the table, forced Bertha's Soul Gem from her hand, and locked it in.

"Leave this room, and you drop dead. Without transforming, you're not strong enough to break a safe—and there will be consequences if you try, or make any kind of fuss. Quite efficient, eh?"

Bertha drew a copious breath into her lungs, and burst out in a hoarse, hysterical shrill;

"I'm prepared for such cruel Jewish tricks—you won't force me into anything! I know you're the cowardly scum who sold out the Fatherland—!"

"Really? I know I never got a cheque!" It took some effort for Sarah to laugh at Anne's ancient joke, but meeting Bertha's insults with levity took her completely aback. Anne manoeuvred her into a chair, hand on her shoulder,

"Were you really in the German army? You must've still had to hunt Witches."

"The Russian front had more Witches than the slopes of hell. Puella Magi were called by the Thule Society to protect Germany's heroes from Communist demons."

"The Pilot told me about the Thule Society," Sarah whispered to Anne, "A cult of would-be magicians who gathered a few Puella Magi. They've had

no influence with Hitler since Stalingrad."

"Yes, only a few Puella Magi went to Russia!" Bertha was really hitting her stride, "The rest were traitors so corrupt they wouldn't even hunt Familiars! But as a true Aryan woman, daughter of a German soldier, a member of the League of German Girls, I had to go—to save the *Volk*, I had to—!"

"Kill many Jews in Russia?" As Sarah stood up, her eyes cut Bertha off like a knife, "See any killed? I really think I should ask."

"They—our men only killed enemies of the Fatherland! Reds, partisans, cannibals and subhumans...our glorious Reich has thousands of enemies! I just didn't know so many of them would be children—!" Bertha's eyes rolled madly, and she poured out tears. As if unsure that she could, Anne put her arms round the girl's shoulders.

She was realising that Bertha was a believer, but never a killer. The traumatic horrors of Russia as well as the unthinkable shame of being defeated by Jews had ground against the romantic propaganda she had been stuffed with, and left a screaming child with rags for a mind.

"Shh, shh...what's your favourite movie, Bertha?"

"Ugh... *Snow White*. When the Witch gave Snow that apple, I wanted to call out to her." Anne had thought it rather soppy, but she remembered most of the lines, and some of the voices. Bertha had seen some other movies Anne liked, so they could talk from some minutes about subjects harmless to both of them.

As the black and blonde head moved together with respective laughter and tears, Sarah watched in admiration.

"...yes, is good looking isn't he? Did you have a boyfriend at all, Bertha?"

"There were soldiers in Russia. German men defending the people have legitimate needs, and I hoped to have strong Aryan children before the end."

Anne was torn between hugging Bertha in pity and the stronger urge to run away and throw up. "I just wanted to serve Germany, and meet a nice man to give six wonderful children and build the future. I truly hoped...but after Russia I was sent to a camp in Poland, where I think they wanted to dissect me to find the magical part, so I ran away. I've been wandering in shame ever since."

"Look," Sarah interrupted, "You said you were cured of MS. But weren't the Nazis killing incurable patients since 1939?"

"Of course! Such useless burdens are better dead."

"Listen to yourself—you were such a burden! You have as much reason to hate the Nazis as we do!"

"Have you ever had such an illness, Jew? Before, I could run, dance and dream; by the end I couldn't cook—I couldn't even feed myself, or hug the league girls who'd been my friends. I was a shame to my parents, useless to Germany—I would have kissed the hand that cut my throat, before the white cat came to me.

I Wished for the body of a perfect Aryan woman, so I could finally be all the Furrer I love asks of his children. I wouldn't expect Jews with nothing to take pride in to understand."

Anne and Sarah left Bertha in the dining room, talking as they went.

" Oy vey, what a mess. She's a Nazi and more a victim than either of us. I'm glad I didn't kill her...but I want to kick the shit out of the bastards who polluted her mind. When the Pilot comes back, I want to go with her, Anne—we have to end this nightmare right now. The Pilot could fly me to Berlin or anywhere. With the other Puella Magi she contacted, the Nazi leaders could be wiped out at a stroke."

"Sarah, would that work? Wouldn't Germany just make a conditional peace, and start another war with England in another twenty years?"

"So you'd have thousands of Allies and Russians die, to smash Germany back to the Stone Age?"

"No! But to totally destroy Nazism for good...?" Anne stopped in the street, feeling quite angry and confused. Sarah regarded her for a moment, then put her arms around her and squeezed.

"You've really grown up, Anne. In a fortnight, we'll talk about where we'll go; Berlin, Normandy or one then the other. I don't have any fears about leaving Amsterdam to you."

"Oh, Sarah, I mean...that seems so solemn..."

"Alright, you and Lies. Maybe even the Nazi. You really handled her well, you know."

"...to be honest, I think she's pitifully weak and stupid. But I suppose after being trapped with Mr Dussel and the Van Pels for two years, I can get on with Bertha if I have to."

"I think she even suspects that you could be human. More human than me, anyway."

"Sarah...you had to play a bad cop, but don't ever worry about anything you've done. You're my hero, whatever happens."

"God, you can be sweet, Anne. Don't stop writing, you hear? Our war isn't going to end with Hitler...so don't ever stop living like you do."

Standing before a sea that might instantly open a path for them, or sweep them apart, the two girls quickly embraced, before heading off to hunt for Witches.

Bertha watched them go, from a half-boarded window.

For a week, Sarah kept checking on her old house, and Bertha. One day she found a long-lost book behind a cabinet, and sat to read for a minute, while Bertha glowered over the small meal she'd brought her.

"Read at all, Bertha?"

"I prefer cooking, and healthy sports."

"And movies, right?"

"Movies and songs express the heart. Books like *those* carry the virus of un-German thought."

"I know you're a Nazi—but can't you lay off it a bit? Accept that we disagree on things, like my right to live without being slaughtered. You must realise, I could be stamping your blonde head into the floor right now; yet I'm even breaking bread with you. It's not just tolerance; its real strength, don't you see?"

"Strength is to fight to the end for *Volk* and Fatherland. My father lost his arm for Germany in the Great War—but Jews stole his victory, for their filthy Republic, and gave our country to foreigners, Communists and sodomites!

However many Germans starve and die, you only rush to the winning side. But we will have Germany for true Germans, because our culture and spirit are worth fighting for! We won't be crushed by fat Jewish subhumans who can respect nothing but money and lies!"

Sarah smiled quietly at the ceiling. Her offhand reply knocked Bertha for six.

"My father was just like that, you know. He was a diamond trader. Both my parents were the most selfish, miserable archetypes imaginable. They'd exploit Jews as easily as Christians; their only scripture was the fifth commandment. I never wanted to be like them, so I started helping in soup kitchens and handing out socialist pamphlets at school. They didn't actually kick me out; but I knew they weren't my parents any more. I guess I wanted to be like Rosa Luxemburg or Emily Pankhurst; someone I could respect, never mind anyone else."

"Were they killed then, your parents?" Bertha blurted out.

"Two years ago, Anne, me and a friend rescued some Jews on their way to be deported. I convinced most of them to take their last chance to run, but a few couldn't stop hoping things would really be alright. My mother and father wouldn't run; I'm almost certain they went to Poland, and the gas. Even with twice the faults they had, they did not deserve that. I never told Debbie, or Anne."

"Why...tell me?"

"Maybe for your beautiful blue eyes? Or maybe I'm fighting to show you I'm human. I don't want any label but Sarah Asscher. I don't want to live an empty life, like my parents; before I die, I want to do something. What do you want to do, Bertha? Kill the Jew?"

"I...just wanted a warm family. Nothing selfish or controlling, like you."

"Since I did beat your Wish out of you, I should tell you mine. I didn't wish to be the premiere, or an orator moving thousands—I wanted to earn at that for others, not take it for myself. But growing up so fast, from a rich world to an adult one, I'd always felt alone. So I Wished to find true, real friends, until death do us part. If you tell Anne, I really will smash your head."

"I...I'm not going to forgive you! You could never do anything good, and we could never be friends. You're a Jew; you're natural different from other humans!"

"Thank you, Bertha. You just said I'm human—that means a lot to me."

Sarah listened from outside the door. She found it a strong, unsatisfying feeling to have made a Nazi cry.

" *They're coming. They're coming...*"

The child in rags flitted through a minute doorway. Gun ready, Anne dashed through the maze of ladders and attics. She had stumbled on the Witch as she went to meet Sarah, and decided to take it alone. She was stronger than any Witch now; a serious wound might begin to wear her down, but if she stayed

sharp—

The doorframe above Anne grew teeth and snapped down. She barely dived into the room ahead, which sagged down to smother her. This Witch was its own barrier, and she was effectively in its stomach. The despair of hiding in fear, followed by the extermination camps, had made the Witch strong.

Anne fired at the ceiling; as the room convulsed with a shriek, she dived out again, tracking the child's sobbing throughout its own hiding place. Finally she dodged another biting door, and glimpsed the Witch's pale face in a distant window. She froze it in place with her magic smile, aimed in a pure moment and fired. Then she advanced, firing until the Wicked Witch was dead.

" *They're coming...*" The creature finally wailed, before dissolving away. Anne could never help remembering that she was fighting former-Puella Magi. But however selfish and low it felt to kill them off, she knew it had to be done. And for her family, for dear, lovely, Peter, she had to survive. And it looked like she could do that, even alone.

Before Anne reached Sarah's house, the older girl stopped her with telepathy and came to her in the evening street. Anne could see in her eyes that almost everything had gone wrong in a few hours.

"Bertha's gone. She forced the safe open, got her Soul Gem and ran. If she burnt magic for strength without transforming, she was damn lucky not have gone Witch—but anyway, that house isn't safe anymore. I barely stayed to find this behind the cabinet." Sarah passed Anne a crumpled paper *Sarah, Anne. I have to go back to Bremen; I'm too afraid of project Lorelei to stay with you. I'm sorry, and I'm sorry you couldn't save me. I hope there are people in the world you can save. Bertha.*

"She knew something about Lorelei all along, but the poor girl...and isn't Bremen the place where that Black Sabbath thing came down? We'll have to tell the Pilot about everything."

"No. I'm going after her—to Bremen, if I have to. If I stow away on a train, it

might take two weeks. I know you could hold the fort here much longer."

"Sarah, you'd be heading into Germany! Even if you made it, you could be facing anything—you can't ask me to wait here, and let you go alone!"

"Anne, I won't let the Nazis take Bertha away again, but I won't drag you into something this crazy either. Besides, if you were gone a week, your family—"

"I...I could come out to them! About you, and Debbie, the Witches and the costumes. I don't know what they'd say, or what I could say to them—but, for you, I could—"

Sarah saw that Anne would, despite the fear and guilt of confession. Because of her friendship—or because of Sarah's Wish for a friend? The question had lodged like a razor in her mind for years. Now, Sarah looked on the war in Anne's eyes, and decided the only way to have a friend was to deserve one. She kissed Anne's forehead softly, and smiled at her, eyes flashing.

"Someone has to protect the people of Amsterdam, Anne. And you shouldn't leave your parents—family really is important. Okay?"

Anne watched Sarah sprint away into the night.

Bremen, Germany, a week later

The door shot back, knocking one guard down. Spinning in, Sarah fired another into the wall with a back kick, and felled two more with clean punches before they'd released their breath. Her super-hearing detected a scraping trigger at her back—her cloak billowed out as she flung a downed soldier into the first one, taking both men out.

The only German facility anywhere near the central crater of Bremen seemed to have been converted from a bombed out school building. There had been a few *Wermacht* outside, and a large electrical generator; within a ruined city, everything was painfully well-lit. Moving on from the guardroom, Sarah peered into what had been a gymnasium.

The whole floor space was taken up with chemicals and equipment; a few researchers were still pouring over samples of soil and what looked like pieces of a Witch. Reams of paper were tacked to the wall; Sarah's eyes picked out a black robed figure, with a scythe above his great wings. Circles of dancing figures, and artwork of witches' sabbats and Klezmer dances were rather stranger.

Sarah thought of all the Witches pouring out of the extermination camps, and uneasily wondered about evolution; one Witch might learn cooperation and teach others. Witches as a whole would be changed. More urgently, a girl was strapped to a hospital gurney, obviously on the verge of going Witch. She was surrounded by hypnotic metronomes, and instruments with an obvious purpose.

Sarah walked in, calmly slamming one researcher's head into his own bench and punching the other down. She felt as if this was born to do this, but it had to be for Bertha—there she was, strapped down next to the dying girl on another gurney. Sarah ran to her side, and smiled down at her. The German girl's breathing was ragged.

"I'm...not sorry..."

Sarah heard the footsteps, but they had broken into a run before she turned. A crack burst in her ears, and darkness consumed her eyes forever.

Amsterdam, three days later

" Attention, Anne Frank. This message is being sent throughout Amsterdam, to whatever rathole you have hidden in. Come to the Dutch theatre at 00 hours tonight. Or come next week at the same time if you'd rather, after your friend Sarah Asscher has spent further memorable time in our care."

Anne was in her room, alone. She realised that she'd never known Sarah's second name, before her legs collapsed.

For two hours, she fought with her body, trying to hold herself together, and see a way through to life—but the word on her forehead seemed to have

become death. She knew if she went to Peter, or her father, she would never be able to

go.

Finally, she dropped out of the Annex window. The street outside had never seemed longer, and it was a mile to the theatre. Anne walked as slowly as a girl of clay, until she stopped on a street near her destination, where Lies was standing in her funny little lion outfit.

"I got the telepathy aimed at you as well—someone repeated it all over the city.

What do they want?"

Anne stared at Lies for a moment. Weighing chances in the balance.

Since the end of mass deportations, the Dutch Theatre had been abandoned, and only lightly damaged by bombing. Remembering the Musketeers' first small victory two hard years ago, Anne could have smiled, if the fear wasn't so strong her knees could barely keep her up.

She walked onto the stage, shielding her eyes as the lights went up. Shadows in black uniforms aimed their rifles at her from the seats. A chuckle came from behind them, before a spotlight burst on the front of the aisle, and Anne screamed.

Sarah was on her knees; her beautiful eyes were blood. The woman behind her held a whip, but her wounds looked more like knives. Everywhere, she was wet, and smelt; Anne finally realised that she had been urinated on several times.

Bertha stood on the woman's other side, with a born follower's fierce subservience.

The woman wore a black SS uniform and cap, with a Grief Seed above the peak.

She had painfully sharp cheekbones, voluptuous breasts, and eyes like none Anne had ever looked on.

" *Wilcomen*, Anne Frank, Puella Magi, our star attraction. I am the Fuhrer's special agent for magical affairs, Gruppenfuhrer Ilsa Koch." She didn't need to

add that she was called the She-Wolf; Anne could tell by the hunger in her eyes and lips.

"Charmed. Let Sarah go now, and I'll let you all live."

Anne couldn't stop her voice shaking; the SS woman laughed. Anne tried her smile, the soldiers lost focus for a moment, but Ilsa didn't even blink; she was too strong.

"Dear me. Why should I let this Jew go when dear Bertha went to such trouble to lure her out? I intend to reward her specially," As Ilsa ran a hand over Bertha's plait, the young girl breathed in a way Anne remembered from her times alone with Peter; it made her sick to watch. Ilsa turned to Sarah again, "In any case, what would she do with freedom but die? When she realized there was no escape, she bawled and pleaded in a most shameless way. No pride, no willpower...no loyalty. Isn't it terrible to be a Jew, Sarah?"

"Shut up! She didn't tell you where the Pilot is, because we don't know! You might think killing helpless innocents makes you *super*, but the Americans and the British will beat you—"

"Do you mean Amelia Earhart? She is in France, where I killed two of her comrades last week. This week I will kill you, next week I will kill her, and a fortnight after that, the Americans and British." Anne could only stare, as Ilsa licked her lips, "Being superior is what I am. Doing this to you is just a pleasure of the privileged." She gestured to two SS men near the stage, "Soften her defiance up for me a little."

"Anne—!"

One of them had a luger aimed; the other had his hands free. Anne trembled as they moved towards her—then she breathed in. A rifle flashed out, and she shot the gunman in one eye; as the other man tried to grab her she swung the stock into his head like a woodcutter. As his knees hit the stage Anne was behind him, rifle held against his neck to snap it.

"Hold! Hold your fire! Oh, Anne...so helpless and innocent! From pure instinct,

you kill and take a hostage—who is he, then, who says I play the villain? Or as the bard also says so well—" Ilsa whip unfurled; Sarah groaned as it chopped through her back "—does not a Jew bleed? Especially with such a full, fleshy body—"

"Sarah! It's going to be alright."

"Yes of course. This is the usual place in the movie for a rescuer to burst in, is it not?"

Anne's heart dropped through her stomach, as two more SS men pushed Lies through the theatre doors. She was bleeding from her scalp, but still glared defiantly. Ilsa's rich, merry voice rolled on;

"It was a fair idea to ambush us, and quite resourceful to enlist the aid of a gentile—my men are not amateurs, however. It seems another girl will have cause to regret being your friend."

"Anne told me what you do to German Puella," Lies snapped, "I decided I'd fight rather than be hunted; I'm not afraid of you."

Ilsa flicked her whip around Lies' neck and dragged her to her booted feet.

"Hunted? Our researchers gain all the subjects we need from dissidents; I'm quite free to let you go, child. On the condition that your Jewish friend saves me the trouble of rooting out her family."

"Why?"

"Of course, I would normally leave Jewish rubbish for the regular collectors.

However, you are no common Jew, Anne Frank. You have made it my honorable duty as an SS officer to bring justice on your family, for their *Sippenhaftun* in your crime against the Reich. Well, Anne? You can free the poor girl you led here, and buy quick deaths for the people you love, merely by accepting that they cannot be saved."

Anne stared into Lies eyes, shaking with the impossible choice. Nothing could

be worse than her father, mother, sister and Peter falling into the gloves of this monster. But after Lies had stood by her, only a monster would abandon the Dutch girl to unthinkable torture. Every lie the Nazis roared out to Europe that Jews cared for nothing but their kin would become true in Lies' death. Anne's love for her family, the purest part of herself she had held through years of fighting, would become black and filthy. She was destroyed and damned, whatever she said.

"Face it, Anne. Don't be weak." Ilsa brought her whip down on Sarah again.

Even Bertha and the SS men looked broken as Anne wept. She threw her unconscious hostage aside, and begged Ilsa to hurt and kill her instead, "That's not what I want, Anne. Give me what I want."

"Ugh....you want me...to say my people can't be saved? That I was wrong to fight? That you're....a goddess...and we're all worms who live and die at your pleasure?"

"My, what a way with words you have..."

"I won't say it!" Sarah groaned as blood flew from her back, "I'm a Puella Magi, a golem, Annalies Frank! I will never give in to you; I will never give up who I am! For my family I love, for all my friends who don't deserve to die; no matter how weak I am or what vile things you do—" As Sarah finally screamed out, Anne's voice rose to a wail of pain, "—I will resist you even beyond my own death!"

"Ooh—Anne!" As Ilsa gasped out pleasure, her eyes rolled up in her head.

Anne realized as she smiled that she had misjudged Ilsa's sadism. It wasn't breaking people that really turned her on, but the deeper pain of the victim who endured to the end.

All the SS men were looking at Anne; her smile blinded them all for moments.

As Ilsa recovered her composure, Anne was aiming a new rifle; as the whip unfolded, Anne fired.

The lash knocked her down, but blood flowered from Ilsa's shoulder, and she

dropped her whip. As Anne dived into the wings, and the SS men raked the stage with gunfire from the stalls, Sarah rose and shoulder-charged Ilsa to the ground. Lies summoned a sword, and charged towards the Germans with a roar.

Bertha sank to her knees, staring at Sarah and Ilsa as they wrestled.

Ignoring Ilsa's punches, Sarah hammered her forehead down, and regained her feet. An SS man fired his rifle into her back; she swayed, and drove her foot into Ilsa's chest.

"Don't hurt Anne. Not Anne, you bitch!" More bullets punched through her, but she stayed up, stamping with such fury that the floor cracked beneath Ilsa's body. The SS men became confused whether to rescue their commander, pin down the small lion girl darting a bloody trail among them—or fire on the girl leaping from the stage in a flash of red lace and black stockings, with ten loaded rifles above her head.

Anne's barrage drove most of them to cover. Dashing through the seats, she picked off a man with every shot. She saw a soldier aim his Schmiesser at her, blink as she smiled, and fall back with his head burst out. Rolling behind a seat she shot an officer who'd got close enough to aim at the blinded Sarah's head.

Bertha finally regained her feet, but Lies punched her down; then she and Sarah were knocked down by the leathery wings that burst from Ilsa.

As the She-Wolf soared up to the roof and away, Anne could hear her singing. It was the kind of flesh-creeping backwards-German language she had heard a few Witches use. Her wings weren't just dark either, but seemed to have shapes inside them of unworldly size and geometry.

Anne looked away, and rushed to Sarah. Hugging the fallen young woman in her arms, she dug in her pocket for a Grief Seed.

"No. I couldn't heal this....without going Witch. I'm not doing that."

"Sarah, you resisted; you never told her anything, she never broke you! I—"

"If I'd known anything...I would've told her, Anne. The Pilot, your family, *you*...I would have given up anyone to stop that pain. I'm...nothing. Broken.

God...I never deserved you, Anne."

"Sarah! You're going to kill Hitler, end the war, and become Premiere of Holland and I'm always going to be with you! I could never have fought if you weren't there, you're my best friend! Please—"

"It's okay, Anne." Sarah ripped her Soul Gem from her cape, barely a spark of blue remaining, "I won't make you do what you did for Debbie again. Let me...

save you from something."

Sarah placed her Soul Gem beside her. After a minute, tears ran from her eyes.

Her fist still hung over the Gem, trembling.

All the Laws that barred suicides from heaven rushed around Anne's head. She could live forever with the tiny, damning doubt, or take the last thing that mattered to the best girl she knew. It was a simple choice compared to the last one, even if it damned her.

Anne smashed Sarah's Soul Gem with the butt of her gun. Her friend's lips formed a silent 'no', before life vanished from her body.

Anne looked up at Bertha—or what had been Bertha, before she had watched Sarah die. A horse as tall as a clocktower stamped across a blasted moor,

barely supporting an obscenely fat woman with red glow beneath her horned helmet.

Wagner warbled out from all sides, as Anne summoned a loaded rifle.

"I'll deal with *her*." Lies rushed ahead of Anne, brandishing her sword, "You follow that woman's singing, before something really bad happens."

"...Thank you, Lies."

"You'd better say thank you, Jew."

Anne almost stumbled and fell in the lobby, but she burst through the doors, running through the sparse tears of desperate haste.

Anne could hear Ilsa's song as she rushed through the streets; she suspected Puella Magi on the other side of Europe could hear it faintly. Rain was slicking the cobbles under her feet, and something like a dark cloud was filling the sky.

It occurred to her that Project Lorelei was named after a ghostly woman who allegedly sat on a rock in the Rhine River and lured ships to their doom with singing.

She was coming up to Zuiderkerk, one of the most famous churches in the city.

As she ran past the tree-lined canal it overlooked, she saw Ilsa before it, wounds healing quickly, and wings outstretched. Anne immediately raised her gun, but something in Ilsa's smile kept her from firing as she ran closer.

"I suppose you'd like to know how I intend to escape you."

"You could've flown away already, if you wanted to. I'd guess you've already called up the Wermacht, to kill me and as many other people as you feel like?"

"Oh no. I've summoned Black Sabbath. It seems to be listening to me; even as a fellow Witch I wasn't certain it would."

"What is Black Sabbath?"

"A Witch made of many Witches; from the many Jews who escaped Auschwitz with their Wishes, and despaired of such lives. A Witch I can direct with my voice, ironically enough. A Witch to utterly destroy this city," Ilsa's smile was very satisfied; "That is the punishment for subhumans who defy the superhuman.

"You were born wrong. You weren't ever human."

"I assure you I was—until I became a Witch." Flexing her wings, Ilsa began to march up and down with the sheer sadistic joy of her words, "Your friend Sarah seemed quite frightened that the pain would change her, but I tell you, it is a stamp of dark nobility. To utter understand the true selfishness and sadism of human nature, with every comforting moral lie stripped away—weak Jewish children might become insane from such a vision, but not me. I did not become a Witch, but an Angel. Only a few in history have had the strength; so I must

use my strength. I must destroy the Allied invasion with Black Sabbath. I must end the war and one day become Fuhrer. I must never die, until Germany is a nation of *Übermenschen*!"

"Those are your dreams? Well, Sarah had different dreams. I will not let you live when she died!"

The whip knocked her down, but Anne kept her gun and shot Ilsa through the chest; unmoved, the Nazi flicked her whip around Anne's neck. Anne yanked on it before the grip could tighten with furious strength, and punched Ilsa in the face, until her hand was grabbed and she was thrown aside. As she rose and fired again, Ilsa charged at her in a weaving path; Anne only caught her shoulder before she was borne into the canal behind them.

As Anne fought for breath, Ilsa pinned her hands; the Nazi Witch was stronger than her, with bigger lungs. Struggling against the water, Anne bit at Ilsa's face, but it did nothing. At last, she managed to focus strength in her legs, and propel them both from the water. Both of them thumped onto

the cobbles; before Anne could aim another rifle, ten whips were sliding through her soaked clothing like snakes—they were growing from Ilsa's fingers. Her form was less clear and more Witch like; her breath was racing. As she lifted Anne, and kissed her mouth hard, a fear Anne had never experienced in her fourteen years hit her like a train.

"You're so defiant, Anne. So strong. I think I could hurt you forever, with everyone you care about. it must be the reason that God made the Jews—"

The rifle suspended above Ilsa sent its ball into her shoulder. Anne ripped the tendrils from her body, summoned another gun, and shot her in the chest again; Ilsa fell. One hand rose with a luger; desperately, Anne broke her finger against the pavement with a blow, and brought the rifle stock down again into Ilsa's face.

"Sarah! Debbie! Margot! Peter! Papa and Mama!" Ilsa's Grief Seed shattered; Anne kept swinging the rifle down like a woodcutter, tearing bone and flesh.

"We have names! We only want to live in peace! My family...God..."

Anne finally stopped and stared at the red stain. Blood was splashed up the length of rifle to her hands.

She was a fourteen year old girl. She knew she shouldn't have to be in such a place, doing such things. But like divine justice, a skeleton in a black dress as large as a Cathedral dome was spinning through the sky above Zuiderkerk. It was screaming, and getting closer to the ground.

"It's like *King Kong*, isn't it?" Lies had appeared behind Anne.

"It's the Witches left by Jews who saw hell. And ended up as a Nazi super-weapon."

"Then it's the first Witch I feel sorry for. I haven't much magic left."

"Same here. Lies...what was your Wish?"

"I...Wished that I could be brave. I think I should have wished for heart, and I might have fought with you from the beginning. I'm sorry—"

"It's alright. I can forgive a fellow *Wizard of Oz* fan. Do you think we kill that thing without blowing up our own Soul Gems?"

"Well years ago, when that Witch chopped up my plane, I had to learn to fly between 5000 ft and the Pacific Ocean." An American voice sounded behind the two girls, "Some things, you can only try to do."

The American Pilot was standing behind Anne and Lies, cap under her arm. Her wings of wood and canvas such as Icarus might have used were extended from her back.

"Miss...Earhart? I mean—"

"It's alright Anne. I think I've had enough of flitting around Europe like the Lone Ranger," As she looked up, Anne saw that Amelia's eyes were wet, "This is what it feels like to turn up after the last minute. That poor, poor girl."

The battle lasted little more than an hour, but after ten minutes, Anne only wanted everything to end. As Lies sliced through the black familiars flitting about, she poured fire from a hundred rifles into the body. Energy burst from the giant eye-sockets; trying to leap to another roof, Anne fell to the alley below.

She was killing herself, and not even denting it.

From the reddening sky, Earhart dived on Black Sabbath in a trail of light, firing a revolver that blew vast holes in its frame. Anne watched her soar around the monster for a time that seemed short when another energy burst charred through her wings and chest. As Anne leapt up to the roof again, desperately summoning rifles, she saw one last gap-toothed grin in the sky.

"Take care of yourself, gunslinger girl."

Even if she was the link between Puella Magi all over Europe, who might have joined and deployed the strengths to end the war, Anne wasn't surprised. Earhart was the type who sacrificed for others, rather than expecting them to do likewise for her. Flapping into the skull's mouth with a stroke, she charged her Soul gem with energy until it blew like a tiny sun.

Lies cut through three shadows with a roar to carve out the body, while Anne summoned fields of rifles until she could barely stand or do otherwise. The giant scythe burst several houses like stone eggs, but Anne kept firing as if locked in a nightmare, and the battle finally ended.

As the screaming died away, and Black Sabbath began to dissipate into peace, Anne touched ground, dismissed her costume, and staggered towards

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Prinsengracht.

"Anne?" Pale in the gloom, Anne stared at Peter's face. She had just re-entered the Annex through the window, and Peter had obviously seen her, but she was too tired to jump or scream in shock. "What have you been doing?"

"I—Peter, I'm sorry—"

"I should think so—you went outside in what sounded like the worst air raid of

the war!" Peter's whisper was confused, but angry, "What if someone had seen you? I can't understand why you would—"

"Oh, Peter!"

All the sorrow, terror and guilt dropped on Anne like a shell. She lost herself completely; she buried her head in Peter's chest, and bawled like mad. Peter put his arms round her shoulders, and said nothing.

"Peter!" His mother poked her head out of a bedroom, "You haven't done something to Anne have you?"

"Probably a nightmare, or something," Mr Dussel, the Annex's final resident, wandered out as well, "Commendable of you to be dressed so early anyway."

Anne's sister, Margot, quietly walked around Peter, and hugged Anne as well.

Her father told her that she had to be a sensible girl, and endure this miserable confinement a few more months, until the liberation. He was proud of how well she'd coped so far, and hoped to support her in everything.

Dear Kitty. Was it really me who kissed Peter like that yesterday? Was it really me who beat a human skull into vile mess? Neither world seems the least bit real, and I can't believe that I'm someone who killed her best friends...but the accusing voice won't leave me. Maybe there was another way, where things could've somehow gone right. But I chose the way where everyone died. That was me. I can't believe I saved the world, or even Amsterdam. This is a different, ghost world where no one knows me, and I have a right to nothing.

What would Papa, Mama or Peter have thought if I'd never come back, that night? I wish I didn't exist; but in that case, who would be left?

I Wished that everyone in the world would see the real, pure me, from deep inside. I've often thought since the war, and hiding, and Sarah and Debbie, that it was the most idiot Wish every made by a Puella Magi. But if I'm the only Musketeer left, I have to keep hoping that my life will be a help to somebody.

Amsterdam, August 1944

"Catch her! She's a hidden Jew!"

The Gestapo man stabbed a finger down the street. Two Dutch police jogged after the girl, as she ran from the house where she had spent two years hiding in a spare room with her family.

As the girl ran into a square, looking between various streets in panic, a red figure pulled her between two buildings. The two girls stayed absolutely still, as the policemen peered around the square and set off again.

"It's okay. I'm a Jew as well. My name's Anne Frank." The little girl stared up at her rescuer. Her dark eyes were pretty, despite their tiredness, and she was smiling faintly.

Since Black Sabbath, Anne had hunted less frequently. Her family were watching her more attentively, and without Debbie's cloaking or Sarah super-senses, German patrols were a major risk. Lies had left Amsterdam months ago, saying it had too many memories; Anne had never found out about her home situation. The Holland occupation forces presumably knew nothing about secret projects like Lorielei, since there had been no civilian reprisals for the SS squad Anne and Lies had wiped out.

The Allied armies were slogging their way across France towards Holland and the Rhine. The Russians were still getting closer to the death camps in Poland.

Hundreds of Puella Magi were still silently defending the people from Witches.

Anne was doing what she could, but low Grief-Seeds and the magic she had expended against Black Sabbath had sapped her strength.

"Mama, Papa and Grandma. They couldn't run ..." Anne squeezed the little girl's chest.

"You'll see them again when the war ends; the main thing is to keep yourself safe. Did your parents talk about any other hiding places?" Shake, "I know an empty house..."

"I want to see Papa and Grandma again. I'd rather let the Germans catch me than be alone."

Anne looked down at the little girl's wide eyes. She had the urge, to do something totally selfless for the first time in the war.

Anne's Soul Gem suddenly reacted. She couldn't afford to let the Witch go; she couldn't take the girl back directly back to Annex with her, anyway. Anne made a quick choice.

"Listen careful. Stay here until the clock on that church there says five, and then go to 263 Prinsengracht. If you squeeze between two houses at the back you can reach the courtyard of the place where my family is. Throw stones at the window until they let you in; just make sure no one sees you, and when they ask how you knew about it, say you heard your parents talking of a Mr Van Maaren in the neighbourhood gossiping about hidden Jews." Van Maaren was a worker at the Annex offices who the residents suspected of being a Gestapo informant; if the rumour finally prompted Mr Kuglar to fire him, Anne wouldn't be sorry. She smiled at the little girl whose name she would never know, and nipped quickly away, after the Witch.

The girl never arrived at the Annex. Anne reasoned that the Gestapo had no reason to think a small girl knew about other hiding places. They would probably send her straight to Poland, if she was caught. Maybe she was still free, and hadn't wanted to put the Annex at risk.

Maybe Van Maaren did ring the Gestapo. Maybe the results some investigation by project Lorelei took time to filter down to the Amsterdam police. Maybe the little girl had believed her parents would go free, if she answered a few questions. The certainty was that the moment the car pulled up outside the Annex building, Anne felt like every nerve in her body had been cut.

Finally, the concealing bookcase was pushed aside from the door, and a German voice rasped in Anne's ears. A single Gestapo agent, with plainclothes police, nothing to Ilsa or Black Sabbath. In her living room, pointing a gun at her own father. No Witch's mad geometry could've been more unnatural.

Anne knew this was her last choice, even if she was weak, even if there was no chance of getting eight people out of Amsterdam. As the police herded everyone into the living room, she lowered her eyes, and took hold of something in her pocket.

Some instinct warned the Gestapo agent that his life was in danger. He seized Margot, pointed his luger at her head and looked Anne in the eye.

As a Puella Magi, Anne had killed Nazis, fought Witches and saved Amsterdam from destruction, without being more than a normal, lively girl within the secret annex. She had lied to protect her family, and to keep a precious place where she was simply Anne Frank. She had fought for years, and saved hundreds of lives.

But facing her sister at gunpoint, in the middle of her home, Anne realised that her war was over. She couldn't risk Margot's life like Sarah's. She couldn't break the balance between schoolgirl and warrior by revealing everything to her family. She could kill all the police in the room and more; but her family would not be saved. And she was tired of fighting; at the end of her strength.

Anne looked into Margot's bewildered eyes, and prayed with all her heart for a miracle from God to save the people she loved. The police took them from the house, leaving the first of Anne's two diaries scattered on the floor.

"Anne. What were you doing, that night? Was the worst raid...really a raid?"

As the train jolted Anne over the stark wooden floor of the cattle truck, she shook her head.

"Peter—I—"

"If there's a something you really need to do...you should escape and do it, Anne. I know you're... *special*. If you can live, that'll be something, for me, and your father..."

Anne put her hand on Peter's, smiling sadly.

"I'm not special, Peter, I'm just a young girl. I'm only going to stay with you,

whatever happens. I...thank you, so much."

From among the press, an old man started moaning Psalm 130; his wife quickly shut him up. Anne and a Peter looked at each other, and began to pray for a true miracle together.

Auschwitz ex termination camp, Poland, September 1944

On dead legs, Anne dropped from the sweat-smelling carriage into a cold wind.

The iron gates were ahead of her, and the charred, greasy air already clung to her lips. Not an aura of hellish evil no animals would come near—it was the fumes from perpetual incineration of humans, stretching for miles into the wilderness around the camp.

Bodies shuffled around her with grating, desperate voices. Taken from every place in Europe, they were already nothing but prisoners; a chance remained, but everything that made hope in it was burnt. Auschwitz was too vast to be seen, even before their faces, but every part of human life was consumed in it; a sacrificial temple worshipping nothing and built on heaped up annihilation.

When Anne looked at her Soul Gem, it was almost overwhelmed by black.

The soldier behind Anne shoved his rifle into her spine. He had none of Ilsa's sadistic ecstasy, but he would do worse to her, if he was only ordered.

Everything was broken except her grip on her father's hand. On the words

'Freedom through Labour, above the gate, the white cat was stretched out.

— *You did well, Anne; at your best you were the strongest Puella Magi in Europe. You're not going to take the same way out as Sarah, are you?—*

" *I haven't lost hope yet; I'm still waiting for my Wish. But I want to know why.*"

— *To save the universe...—*

" Why does saving the universe look like this? Why do we all have to be sacrifices?"

– The Puella Magi or the Jews? In one case because you chose it. In the other, because humans did. Either a single madman with a devilish magical power to exact his will, or thousands of people who wished together for revenge, catharsis and death. I don't understand it any more than you, Anne, but there's no God, devil or omnipotent conspiracy that chooses death. It's only ever you.

And us–

" What...do you think of us, then? Were Sarah, Debbie and Bertha more than ants to you?"

The white cat stared towards the chimneys of Auschwitz.

– Quite an apt comparison. At best, your strength and cooperation stands as a miracle beside your size; without unity of minds, you can join your efforts to move tiny mountains. At worst, I think Swift described you correctly, as the most odious vermin nature ever produced–

Anne trudged on into the camp. The white cat heard her cry out as her father's hand was wrenched from her. It turned back to a girl with long dark hair, approaching the gate, and leaned down.

– Hello, Rachel. My name is Kyubey. Do you want to make a Contract with me, and become a Puella Magi?–

A/N: Sippenhaftun is kin guilt, and was the law the Nazis used to punish the relatives of German dissidents for their family member's 'crimes'. Since Jews are condemned anyway, Ilsa evokes it here simply to torment Anne by reminding her of the danger she was putting her family in. Ilsa Koch was a real female concentration camp officer, but her character here is lifted, of course, from 'Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS', the notorious nazi exploitation film.

Ilsa tortures female prisoners in the film even more nastily than seen here; coincidentally, she becomes obsessed with a prisoner no amount of torture

can break, called Anna.

At Auschwitz, the Franks were separated into the male and female sub-camps

on arrival. Although her father actually survived, and went on to publish her diary, Anne believed until her death that he had been immediately selected for the gas chambers, as Peter's father was within about a month.

***Chapter 12*: Unknown Soldiers pt 1**

A/N: Mass suicides in Germany at the close of WWII exceeded 7000 in Berlin alone, with many more in the eastern regions, comparable to those associated with the surrender of Japan. Leni Riefenstahl and Dr Joseph Mengeles, the

'mother' and 'father' of Walpurgisnacht were respectively Nazi Germany's top film director, famed for the propaganda piece 'Triumph of the Will', and the archetypical 'mad Nazi scientist'.

The Tibetan extract provides a variant origin of the famous Bathing Festival, when Tibetans bath in lakes for good health. The Ashanti eventually became an advanced empire strong enough to defeat the British multiple times. The Thrymskvidha saga describes the god Thor dressing up as woman to recover his hammer from the giants.

Berlin, 1944

A man with a club foot and a man with a distinctive moustache stood in a room lined with red banners. Both had the tired eyes of the statesman or starved wolf.

The banners hid wooden panels marked with runes—the most fanatic SS officers had held their weddings in such pagan halls rather than churches. Ranks of soldiers behind the two men stood still as buried clay figures. Before them, a pigtailed girl in a rustic dress sat listening, through headphones, to Beethoven concertos, interspersed with a penetrating mechanical voice.

"Are you certain this will work, Goebbels?"

"She will be Germany's saviour, *miene Fuhrer*. Miss Riefenstahl has most *intensely* educated her for years in nothing but the glorious legend of the Germanic race, and the dream of its salvation that is National Socialism. All the data from Ilse Koch and the Lorelei project on the birth and growth of Witches has been drilled into her and Dr Mengele's system of conditioning ensures that her only happiness is in the accumulation of despair. Having Wished that we will rise again and never fall, she will become a Witch that grows by drawing

Witches to herself—an *Uber*-Witch many times stronger than Black Sabbath, loyal to us. The Russians and Americans will be hurled from the Fatherland at your word of command."

"I see your own way with words has not left you, Goebbels. How did you persuade Riefenstahl to cooperate? She was always a woman, with no stomach for the defence of her race."

"She was willing, *Meine Fuhrer*. She once told me she was nothing but an artist, and could no more hold an idea back from expression than if she were pregnant with it. I'm frankly glad she's on our side."

— *You should probably worry more about me being on your side— the white cat regarded the men enigmatically —I'm only cooperating here because I expect surprising results—*

Even the white cat could not see the Angel walking towards the German girl.

She had smooth olive coloured skin, and looked as if she'd tired of wearing clothes about a thousand years ago; her eyes were fantastically expressive, but ancient, as if she'd been a *femme fatale* before the word had been spoken. Her wings were dark holes in the universe, full of non-Euclidian shapes. She knelt before the girl, revealed herself, and put a finger to her lips

" Hello, Frauline. I'm Pandora. A long time ago, I was a Puella Magi, just like the moustache man wants you to be. You don't need to know my story; like all Puella Magi it was nothing more than a choice. The white cat can't Contract a girl who hasn't been offered a choice, so I'm going to offer you one for your very own.

" You can believe what I'm going to tell you, or not. I can't say I'm any friend of the moustache man, but I'm the only voice you'll ever hear that isn't his. I'm going to tell you about him in a minute. But first I'll tell you the stories of a few girls just like you, who had a choice between dying by their own hearts'

will, or living a life without choices or dreams."

Tibetean Highlights, 1200s

Life is full of suffering; suffering is born from desire. Pachhen remembered her Four Noble Truths when the white cat came to her, and rejected selfish wishes.

She only Wished that Tibet, and her own village, would be as they had been before the plague came, with their peace and contentment undisturbed.

Something like green water poured from the air upon all the sick, and they were healed together. There was no question but that Avalokitesvara Buddha had shown the people mercy. Families thronged into the village from scattered huts, to bow before the monastery and string up prayer flags all day, then to dance, tell stories and celebrate all night.

The village continued as it had before the plague. Mustard and barley were picked, Yaks were taken to mountain pastures; the villagers came together in festivals almost every month. Pachhen's older sister married; her father stopped speaking to the Gyantsens over a mangy Yak. The old Abbot who Pachhen had liked passed away; a boy she *might* have loved ran away to the lowland cities.

In cold winters and bad harvests, the people grumbled as they always had.

Pachen strangled the Hungry Ghosts with her mother's mala bracelet, or fired the beads through their many-limbed bodies. She counted sutras on her beads, and prayed that Buddha would teach her humility quickly.

She didn't want a bathing festival in her honour; she didn't want vain rewards or thanks. Only for someone to notice, and say that her wounds had made a difference. To notice she was dying, in the circle of cleansing and corruption held by a demon. A fool stuffed with hell-bound desires, who just didn't want to die while she understood so little.

Ashanti kingdom, Ghana, early 1600s

The drums beat a hole through the universe, until the *Okomfo* rose from his trance, only showing white in his eyes. Many warriors bowed their heads before the god that had occupied a man's body, but little Yita only gazed at him more

eagerly.

Yita's parents filed into the shrine, after the other men and women with the red mark. The god told them to sacrifice, and give up sinning so that their curse would be removed. A few of the people seemed to recover, but were driven to murderous insanity, and promptly sentenced to death by the king. Yita mother and father, with the rest, lay down and died from the knowledge that they were cursed. Everyone was quite sure the curse would pass to Yita as well. After her first menstruation and womanhood ritual, she was unsurprised when none of the town's men paid her attention.

Yita could accept being cursed; she had never wanted to get married. She wanted to defend her tribe, like the *Okomfo* and the warriors, or a mother to all the people. She wanted to do something that would let her hold her head up before anyone. When the white cat came to her, she Wished that she would never fail to protect her people.

Apart from the Witch-curses, there were wars with other tribes, and the slave raids. Rich tribes had always kept slaves, but the white people in the south seemed to desire themendlessly, more than gold. And they paid for slaves with muskets. Small tribes could only drive off armed slave raiders

with guns of their own. And could only afford more shot and powder by raiding for slaves themselves.

A few years later, Yita starting meeting Witches different from the colourful animal monsters she had always fought. Their barriers were darkness, or limbs massed as thick as ants. The Witches had chains about them, thin faces, and eyes of nothing but despair. Yita still sent them home to the gods with her arrows, but she did nothing to help her people in war anymore. There were more of them in an case, more sub-kings, more guns, and more smaller tribes they were forcing tribute from.

She hardly felt part of her tribe anymore; the *Okomfo* was separated, but even he had an open role. She was just an unlucky orphan girl with a prissy attitude who people whispered about in the street. Who would've died years ago if she hadn't fought, for what might never have had any meaning.

Yita finally wandered into the northern bushlands, and lay under a tree. You could talk to the gods there, and make what peace with them you could, when you were cursed to die.

Iceland, early 1000s

Sigrid got Volf 'shield-biter' Volfsson to teach her swordwork by sweet and persistent smiling; the irony was not lost on her. As much as she dreamed of fighting beside her brothers to win riches and glory, she could still weave, cook and brew mead better than almost any girl in town. There were quiet nights when she had to struggle not to find the warm longhouse and her mother's stories quite nice. She would go outside in her shirt and chop logs until she remembered she would be a warrior.

On other nights after a raid, when the men roared and sang until five, Sigrid tried and failed to imagine herself quaffing away beside them. She didn't want to be another smelly man; she wanted to be a hero with a Saga, tested to her limits by deeds she could take pride in. But there wasn't any well-worn path to heroism. Her father almost ruptured himself laughing when she asked to go on the raids with him when she was older; apparently a true warrior did not ask.

Sigrid would have given an arm to have been on Thorfinn's expedition to Vinland, where every man and woman had attempted something never done before. She would certainly have to contrive some way of avoiding marriage; maybe as in the *Thrymskvidha*, by getting her younger brother to dress up as a bride while she ran away.

When the white cat came to her, Sigrid knew it confirmed her uncommon fate; she was not surprised, but there was a lurch in her heart. With a single look back at her longhouse and village, she Wished to discover a country where no Viking had ever walked before.

Rash as Loki, she should have thought more carefully about what she wanted. It was astonishing to be transported through the sky in an instant, as in the chariot of Thor, and the scattered tribes of the distant island were haunted by a few

Witches. However, she soon realised that that it would be a heroic feat for her to ever find and reach Iceland again. Her strong will to break the cords of society had cut her off from her people forever; that had been her Wish.

She fought and saved lives enough for a dozen sagas; she met dark naked tribespeople who called her a goddess. She even faced the ship consuming sea with a brave raft and sail; but she only ever reached other islands, and the Witches were almost exterminated.

It shouldn't have mattered that no one would ever sing songs about her; she probably didn't deserve them. Sigrid just wished she could've seen her family once before she died alone.

Southern Italy, 0079

Though people told her she looked like a Greek or Thracian, Julia could have been a Roman, even from a noble family. She often wondered who her parents had been, and what troubles had induced her mother to sit her down outside the temple of Diana when she'd been four, then turn and vanish into the streets.

Julia hoped that her mother had married a rich man, and that she believed the priestesses had found her daughter before the slavers.

"She'll be a comfort into your old age, Madame. You hear about Thracian slaves giving trouble; but where's a child who never knew anything else going to run off to? In a few years, she'll love you like a cute little daughter!"

Julia did her best to love cleaning and dusting the Tibullus' villa, and serving her mistress at mealtimes, even when her fingers throbbed from scrubbing. She loved Lucretia, the mistress's beautiful head maid and Bianna the cook, who claimed women in Gaul could order men around and have two husbands. She really loved helping her mistress dress for entertainments, when she could touch her expensive clothes and watch her put on make-up. If the world was really so happy, she didn't want to believe it was sad.

Even when the kitchen boy Septimus was found secretly learning to read, and

beaten until he howled. Even when she saw Lucretia go upstairs to the master's rooms one night and come down crying. When Septimus disappeared, and Julia heard that he had escaped, and died on the road of exposure, she realised she had loved Septimus as well. And that her world was starved, chained and rotten.

She heard her mistress's friends laughing inside the villa, and clinking their glasses together. She loved the world, but she hated that.

– *You still have your Wish, Julia. It can be anything*–

"I told you, Mr cat, Sir, I don't know anything. I don't know what freedom is. I want justice."

– *And what is your justice?*–

"Justice...is justice."

– A wise answer. Your Wish will be granted. Thank you for helping to save the world–

In the gorgeous purple dress the white cat gave her, Julia defended the peace of the city from Witches with her javelins. She had so much happiness from punishing them and secretly protecting the Romans who despised her, she didn't care about her Wish producing no visible result. Julia continued to serve her owners until August 0079, when their son knocked over a Greek vase. He pointed at Julia, and his mother slapped her to the floor. When she raised her head, she knew her wish had been granted.

Julia ran through the streets with all the power of her Soul Gem, calling as she went, run, run, run. She finally collapsed on a hill overlooking the city of Pompeii, where the black clouds of the volcano were rapidly spreading their shadow. She had Wished for justice, and this was absolute justice. On the world's banal cruelty, and the foolish pride that was only hers.

Berlin, 1945

– I believe you're finished brainwashing your girl now, Mr Hitler. Surprise me–

"We will certainly will, alien. With the magic your race of slaves does not possess, the Master Race will show you how a universe should be ruled!"

With the twinkling blue-eyes that had made him quite popular with middle-aged women, Moustache knelt at the little girl's side, "My dear. Do you know who I am?"

The girl's mouth opened to grin and her voice was disjointed; she was clearly already crazed.

"Yes, *Miene Fuhrer*."

"Do you know what my wish is? Good. Now, fulfil it."

"Yes, *Miene Fuhrer*. Germany will rise again and never be defeated..."

"No. That is not what I ordered!" The man suddenly roared. "'The National Socialist party will rise again and never be defeated!' Do not accept her Wish until she says it correctly."

—That was your wish Adolf. I have already heard this girl's Wish—

"Stop! Or I'll have you—"

— It is her Wish, Adolf Hitler, and I have too many calls on my time to stop.

Thank you for your help in saving the universe—

As white light blazed around the girl, the cat vanished away. Moustache paced away from her, then turned and roared.

"I ordered you to wish that we would triumph! Without National Socialism, Germany and its fools like you aren't worth my shit!"

"Of course, *you'd* think that. Your father was a Jew, after all."

As the two men and their silent ranks seemed to dissolve in sheer horror, the girl smiled, "You're a failed writer who seduces teenage girls, Mr Goebbels.

Himmler failed as a *chicken farmer*. Goering is a drug addict, Rohm was a sodomite...don't worry, Miss Riefenstahl taught me about the glories of the German people as well! Bismark, Kant, Leibniz...the greatest people in the world, and their greatness ends in you. You're such a joke. I was made to celebrate you forever...I'm the worst joke there ever was,"

The Nazis watched, ashen-faced, as the Puella Magi began to laugh, high and wild. Her Soul Gem steadily became black, and the Witch flashed out into the world. She had to encrust herself with the despair of Witches, as her father had made her for. And she had to spin out a spectacle, for the world where despair marched in ranks towards oblivion, as her mother had taught her.

Walpurgisnacht vanished into Berlin, where suicides over the next week reached one of their highest points.

In later years, Walpurgis Night joined with Witches from Mongolia, Spain, China and Palestine, that had seen horror follow strength from the beginning of human history. In Afganistan and Moscow, Morocco, Cambodia, Libya, Walpurgis spun on to draw a curtain and a shroud over the cultures whose glory had disjointed from remorse. It came to Japan to oversee the end of fanatic military rule. And after seventy years, to a rotten capitalism slowly dying under its own weight, where the last mad villain of the human drama met its final heroine.

***Chapter 13*: CONCLUSION Unknown Soldiers pt 2**

A/N: Kyubey's story to Anne Frank is adapted from 'This way to the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen', by the Polish Auschwitz survivor Tadeusz Borowski.

Roza Shanina, as mentioned, was a famous Soviet sniper who died in action, 1945; her friend Aleksandra 'Sasha' Yekimova was also killed. Her statements and Mrs Frank's actions are not idealised, but adapted respectively from her own diary, and witness accounts.

Solomon Islands, 1945

Maxine Maddison of Little River, Victoria had Wished to travel the world, and she had done it. In a black and purple jacket unusually sombre for a Puella Magi, she had rambled everywhere and seen everything. It had seemed natural to follow her country into the Pacific war.

After a day spent crawling in the island's jungle alone, Maxine had reached the Japanese hold-out camp, killing eleven men, including two who'd actually surrendered. She had walked back to base in half-a-day, to find the bodies of the New South Wales squad she'd fought with scattered around their camp. A blue-haired woman stood over them, with a white kimono and a parasol shading her eyes.

"Ya war's lost, Mama-San. Why the hell d'ya have ta go and do this?"

"For honour. You wouldn't understand."

Maxine pulled her hat down to shade her smouldering blue eyes, as a large knife appeared in her hand. "Can't say I'd care ta, Sport. Tell all the Japs in hell what happens to Japs who kill my mates."

Maxine charged faster than a machine; somehow her enemy stayed ahead of her.

A *shikomizue* flashed from the parasol; she flicked the blade at Maxine from all

sides, cutting at her cheeks.

"My name is Miki Rei, *Gaijin*. For sake of my love, who died without knowing he had a son, I will give up my life for revenge."

Maxine jumped back, pulling out her revolver; moving as if she could fly, Rei slashed the gun from her hand. Lunging grimly, Maxine drew blood without pushing her enemy back; the sword flicked across her chest, and Rei drew back to stab. Squeezing magic from her Soul Gem, Maxine leapt to one side, pushed off a tree, and darted behind Rei, driving the knife into her spine.

Rei fell with a single moan. Maxine kicked her body over and straddled her, holding the knife in her face.

"Can't move, can you, Jap? 'S called head on a stick. Wanna surrender now, Jap? You killed my mates—good blokes with homes and souls!—for some bloody revenge..."

Maxine stared at Rei's face. Mouth set, she slashed through a defiant, terrified eye, before falling back on the ground beside her enemy. The Gem on her hat had gone black.

"Bugger me for a bloody fool..."

A dark shape like a bird or a crocodile rose from Maxine's body, and sped away towards Australia. Staring helplessly into the sun's blaze with her

single eye, Rei willed her spine to rejoin before ants or wild beasts ate her where she lay.

East Prussia, 1945

The German Puella in armour had burst from the trees, knocking Sasha's Nagant aside and whipping a pommel across her face. Knocked into the dirt, Sasha could barely hold off the sword with her rifle, when blood burst from under the German girl's helmet. A second shot broke the Soul Gem on her belt.

"Damn...don't scare me like that, alright?"

Hurrying to her friend, Roza laid her own sniper rifle down to push the corpse aside. She glanced from the dead Puella, to drifts of corpses among the trees where the infantry were marching on. Her round face looked fraught.

"Roza, don't you worry." Kalya, third of the sniper friends, squatted next to her,

" *Wermacht* or Puella Magi, they're all Fascist enemies."

"I know. But the people of Germany will miss this girl. German Puella Magi are throwing their lives away like this across the whole front. It is the enemy at *their* gates now, and if they don't die in battle, they'll only...you know." Earhart had told the Russian Puella Magi where Witches came from, "But with no defence from Witches, more ordinary Germans will die too."

"They shouldn't have voted in the Nazis, then." Kalya still looked uncomfortable. Sasha put a hand on Roza's shoulder.

"We're doing all we can, so don't fret. If Earhart had lived, she could've flown us in to shoot Hitler's moustache off. As it is, we can only reach Berlin on our feet, with one battle and the next. We'd better catch up."

"Things will certainly be different after the war," Roza resumed her normal chatty tone as the snipers set off through the forest, "After fighting as

soldiers, women should be equal to men in everything; even politics. Even Puella Magi will know the true nature of their battle..."

– Yes, and start breaking their Soul Gems or charging off to get killed rather becoming Witches; it's very concerning. Puella Magi have been thrown together so much by the war that the origin of Witches has become common knowledge.

So we're freezing new Contracts for the next year, until the current Puella Magi generation are 99% expended–

"So you no longer even pretend to care about saving people from Witches?"

Roza turned to the black cat that had wandered out, urbanely scratching its nose.

– Many humans will die–but not needless deaths. Not compared to the Burghers you let your comrades rob, and kill when they resisted, in the last village–or the German women you didn't even try to save. You've managed to hide enough

needless deaths from your thoughts already, Roza, so I trust you not to dwell on the sacrifice that our goal requires either–

Kalya's Tokarev handgun fired–the Incabator dodged it, but Sasha's bullet popped its head. Both girls fired into the twitching body again.

"The little demons..." Kalya grimaced, "Enemies of mankind!"

"Not an enemy like the *Wermacht*." Roza looked even grimmer "We sold our souls to defeat the fascists; but those creatures are like the plague or death itself and we're tied to them. I was such a fool..."

"Roza, that thing only came to make us despair! We shouldn't submit to them, but fight to the end for our families and all the families of Russia..." the glib words rang hollow over a battlefield; Sasha desperately seized Roza's hand,

"You became a Puella to save people, Roza; you truly saved me! You shouldn't regret it..."

"Yeah, you got your Wish right," Kalya chipped in, "I'd fling mine back in their smug faces, if I could."

Roza smiled. She held the hands of both her friends that weren't on weapons.

"Oh, Sasha...don't worry about me. I never expected happiness from being a Puella Magi or a soldier—I could never understand a girl who got any happiness from her own Wish. My happiness can't be singular, only shared; my hope won't be crushed by my despair, because I've given it away to all my comrades.

I don't care if I die or kill hundreds of fascists, so long as I can fight with you, the friends I love."

"You should really write for the newspapers, Roza." Kalya quipped "You're scribbling in that diary often enough."

The three girls noticed a soldier crouched under a twisted tree, with something red on his neck. Taking up their guns, they rushed forward.

Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, Germany, 1945

Anne lay beside her unconscious sister in bed, holding her hand. A feeble prayer rose over the chorus of grating coughs that filled the shed, until someone kicked the old woman to make her be quiet.

"Oh, shut up about God. He's not listening."

Anne could only stare at the man, with hollow eyes rimmed by sores. Noma had eaten away the flesh of the prisoner's nose and lips—more faces like his had poured around Anne in six months than she could count through her headache and weakness.

"I said there's no God, girl—or is He asleep, while we're rotting in this shithole?"

When's he coming down to save His people? How could you believe in a God like *this*?"

Anne thought of the last glimpse she would have of her father and Peter. Mrs Van Pels, who had been warm, lying as cold in the dirt as part of the camp itself. Immovable as gods of death, the camps made their human sacrifices one with themselves. Anne felt like matted dirt had sunk beneath her itching skin and down to her heart. She believed in God, but could no longer remember why.

– Because belief can extend human life by preserving hope, whether justified or not?–

" Kyubey... you're nearly right, for once. I don't want to live any longer, but I still believe there's a God, and a world outside. Even if it all barely seems real anymore—that world, and the Anne back then."

– The camps concentrate humans and their despair; no one in them could believe that everyone can be saved. Most Puella Magi born in the camps Transform within days; almost none retain the power to resist.–

" Almost none?"

– There was a girl from Poland. She Contracted outside the Auschwitz gas chambers, when an SS man went to rape her. She shot him and other SS men, the crowd of new prisoners began to riot, and the Germans fled the scene. It was the Jewish prisoners assigned to strip the condemned of food and valuables that forced the struggling crowd into the gas chambers and called the Germans back. The girl Transformed before they even switched on the gas–

Anne shook her head—tears were no more use.

" Doesn't anyone Wish for the camps to disappear? For things to just be as they were?"

Kyubey indicated an emaciated girl in the corner with his paw; she was staring determinedly at nothing.

– Those Puella Magi end up like her; they flee into a pre-war dream, and Transform from lack of Grief Seeds. A few Puella Magi try to wish away war, disease or death in every decade, and an unreal world is all they get. Or ever honestly wanted. Your Wishes are limited by your hearts; they only create the world you can imagine, or dare to reach for. Fear of magic is a vital survival tool of humans; though the corollary fear of unknowns built Auschwitz. A Puella Magi with the power and the will to be responsible for altering every human life hasn't been hread of in history–

" You're talkative today. Or just eager for me to despair and go Witch?"

– Eagerness is something I only learnt about from humans, along with argument, war and race. Everything happens in its time. I'm honestly not trying to be cruel Anne. I just have nothing more useful I could be doing, and really nothing cheerful to talk to you about–

" Kyubey...you're a monster, but if you weren't around...I might've forgotten about battles and the Annex. Even Sarah and Debbie. Nothing's been real for months, but work, orders and dirt. That's what it's like when everyone dies and leaves you alone."

"...Anne?" Margot squeezed Anne's hand, "Looks like you're thinking...?"

"Just...about friends, Margot. It's okay...I'm not going away."

"Anne...you look so different. Always a dreamer, but strong...you're special, Anne."

Anne rested on Margot's shoulder, and thought of her mother, starving herself to pass food to her sick daughters in Auschwitz. Anne had bitterly repented all the resentment of her mother she had locked up in her diary, and tried to make her eat. She had simply been answered with the look unique to mothers, that Anne would've been proud ever to give to a daughter herself.

"You girls are innocent." Mrs Frank had grated, "You have to live through this until the end."

Anne wanted to tell her mother that she wasn't special or innocent. She had killed her true friends, saved nobody she could name, and tipped her whole family into the grave. She wouldn't even die of starvation, no matter how hollow she grew, until her Soul Gem had finally run down; she had tried to break it, but couldn't. She had given her mother's food to Margot, but now she had nothing.

"I should be caring for you, Anne. I'm the big sister..."

"Shh...just listen. I'll tell you something..."

She could only believe that surviving another day was resistance in itself. When her sister gazed at her, Anne could believe that she hadn't changed. That she was only a young girl, loved and loving, who believed in God, and that people were good at heart. To remain herself in hell was the final battle.

Anne had made her diary because she never wanted to be alone, choked by her weaknesses and longings. She had lost her diary, but she was finally as close to her sister as she should always have been.

—0—

Margot wasn't beside Anne when she woke. Someone had already stolen her

shoes to trade for soup, and left the body in the dirt where she had fallen. Anne slowly took her hand. She wanted to carry her sister away from a shed full of lice and stink, but her own arms were cold and weak. A broken golem; cold clay.

Anne gazed at the dying faces around her with their foul breath and hard eyes.

The last one who had loved and trusted Anne was gone; No one would ever need her again, or forgive her for letting so many people die. Nothing was left of her life but sickness.

" If only there were no people in the world...the real me could come out."

Anne's eyes opened. Faint as flies wings, Witches were hovering above her. She couldn't even run, but they were only waiting.

" You put yourself into Kitty/your Soul Gem grew dark/everything you couldn't carry/didn't want/couldn't face. The truth/the world fallen in despair/the Jews have no greater enemy than the Germans."

"No. I won't..."

" I told a Mayor and his wife what they did at Auschwitz/a German woman drowned in the river/the little girl smothered her sister, and hung herself in the stable/happy is one who pays back the Babylonians/who dashes their infants'

heads against stone/They will cry to God/He will not hear them/Wipe out the Amalakites in the Lord's name!"

Anne didn't want to kill hundreds of Germans she'd never meet. But in a world where despair and hate trampled innocent wishes, she knew she couldn't fight anymore. Her power had killed German soldiers, her friends and her family.

Now she would be alone except for the people she killed. No one would ever know her. The pain as her useless wishes—to be good, noble an inspiration to future people—burned black and shrivelled up.

She was thirsty. She couldn't speak. She couldn't say that people were good.

She wouldn't say that people were doomed to die. She couldn't pray to God anymore—she tried to take another breath. The Witches crowded around the Gem

in her hand that was becoming blacker than anything in the world.

Then Anne heard screams—the Witches were gone in a flash of light. A girl sprang into the air above her, with a dancer's grace. Her Asian face and pink frills seemed irrepressibly child-like; the hope from her face was so beautiful that Anne wept for the first time since Auschwitz

"It's alright, Anne. Your war is over. You don't need to resist anymore, or shed another tear."

"No...I couldn't save anyone, I put my family in danger and they all died. I just want to die –and be with them, if God could ever forgive me. I sold my soul, became something terrible–"

Madoka smiled, and Anne could only believe a universe where she could smile like that had to be wonderful.

"You're just a girl, Anne Frank, and so am I. I know you, and I'm here to take all that bitter regret away. As far as the east is..."

"...from the west. The Lord is one–"

Anne's Soul Gem vanished in Madoka's hands. As she silently went away, Anne knew she was as white as snow, full of peace and grace. She finally knew who she truly was. Forgiven, and able to forgive.

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.

Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born. So shall we know the angels in their majesty after death.

–Dickens, the Old Curiosity Shop

Somewhere between earth and heaven The place that was everywhere felt ready to take any form an observer could conceive. For now it was a white road, where a French teenager in a rough smock was falling to her knees.

"My God, my saviour...oh, glory, glory be. You are my fortress, my rock; you have not left my soul among the dead, your hand is mighty to save. You have rescued me from the fire, and set us all on high by your power...even such a debauched and infamous pagan as–"

"Perchance, are you referring to me?" Cleopatra's hackles rose like an angry cat,

"The Book of the Dead describes trials and hideous beasts within the underworld, but the insults of a stuck-up barbarian peasant are more—"

"Ladies! Didn't you get enough fighting while you were alive?" A strikingly handsome Asian woman interposed herself between Joan and Cleo. She had shining dark hair, and the kind of interesting leather outfit associated with Conan the Barbarian's female rivals. "They say you have to turn your back on the past to ride for the future—"

"PEN! I thought I'd never..." Ahead of the group, a girl in a white tunic waved as she ran. Her eyes were radiant and shadowless.

"Cassie..." Penthesilea ran to meet Cassandra; her tanned arms literally swept the slighter girl off her feet. Cleo watched them with some interest, while Joan went red.

"I...shouldn't be here," Nimue rubbed her head, in quest of vanishing memories,

"I think I did terrible things, and killed people..."

"But none of those horrible things ever happened, silly goose!" Alice twirled with joy, and seized Nimue's hand, "We've been washed as pure as the driven snow, and all that; you can be happy—so you should be! And if you're really Welsh, you should sing!" Pulling her new friend forward as she rushed ahead, Alice burst into song with a perfect Irish accent;

"...Oh, they'll give a party when I come home, they'll come from near and far, and they'll line the road for miles and miles with Irish jaunting cars, They'll be thousands there that I never knew, I've been so long away, but me mudder will introduce 'em all and this to me will say,

'Oh, shake hands with all of the neighbours, and kiss the colleens all, And we'll live content, and pay no rent, in dear old Dongal...'"

Sacagawea and Pocahontas wandered past, chatting as if they'd known each other for years. Charlotte and dark little Mireille were holding hands too, and rushed to Joan as if Bobby Charlton had walked into a Manchester under-16s football club. Mary Tudor and Jane Grey were trying to hide their smiles of relief at seeing each other. Sharbat had lived longer than almost anyone, but the years and lines were swiftly falling from her face.

"...aha, I'm sorry," Anne heard a blue haired Japanese girl speak with a Japanese woman in a red cloak, "Even if you were a queen, I think I slept through that history lesson—" The younger girl turned aside, "My God, you're Anne Frank! I, I mean, when I finished your diary, I cried buckets—"

"You read...my diary?"

"Ah, I think your father published it, after the war—"

"You mean...Papa didn't die? He was always alive?"

"I think so, he—"

Anne laughed, cried, hugged Sayaka, and did everything else but swing her round in a waltz. There had always been hope, and now there always would be.

Joan and Cleo watched Anne's joy, and unbent enough to share a tiny smile.

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"...could be a really wonderful illusion. Until God Himself shows up, I'm still not convinced. Aren't we supposed to be resting on Abraham's bosom anyway, for all the good that would do?"

"Dummy...can't you tell this is the temple of the Lord, where he is God to his people?" Debbie lay on the verge beside Sarah, tears running over her face, "I finally know, I understand. When I was weak and filthy with rage, my perfect Father held me. He will lead me by still waters, he has restored my soul...I've finally found God."

"Hey," Sarah rolled over, leaning above Debbie's face, "Do you mean *you* weren't even sure about heaven and all that?"

"No, but I hoped. I longed to find God, and he's finally come to us...isn't it good, Sarah?"

"Oh yeah." Sarah gazed happily into Debbie's eyes.

A cry from the road drew their faces. As Anne rushed forward and threw herself on them, the war was finished. Nothing was left of suffering but friendship, nothing of loneliness but strength, nothing of death but love.

"Oh Anne," Sarah managed, "Without you, heaven would be too serious for me to take."

Anne wondered, through the joy of redemption and reunion, if this could be heaven when it was shaped by their own thoughts, and they were still the same people. She'd written to Kitty that she could be perfect if there were no other people in the world, because other people pressed you into an accustomed shape.

In fact, only their shared memories might be keeping her as Anne Frank at all, rather than a consciousness without limits or identity spread over time and space. She could feel a kind of pull in that direction, but infinity was scary enough that she might stay in a familiar form with her friends for a couple of millennia.

If anything, this was a waystation on the route to heaven; a place to become perfectly yourself with your friends until you felt you could become something more perfect. As well as understanding every language spoken, the Anne purified from despair and bodily concerns could feel the edge of everything in existence, waiting to be explored. Madoka was there. And even if God was everywhere, Anne knew He was here for certain, and that all of His promises were true.

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"Frau Koch, come on..."

Anne and her friends stopped by the road, which was swiftly filling up with girls. Pigtails shining, Bertha was sitting by the verge. Together with Lies, she was pulling at the arms of an ash-blond teenager with sharp cheekbones Anne recognised with a jolt as Ilse. The Kommandant was in a foetal position; a girl with pigtails was lying beside her, similarly comatose.

Bertha gave the Jewish girls a hesitant, embarrassed smile, which said if they felt it necessary to smack her before trying to be friends, she would gladly accept the price. Sarah gathered her in a hug; Deborah, Anne and Lies joined in as well.

"Isn't it wonderful! It felt so good when the pink angel took all that fear and hate away, I never want to feel those things again! Even National Socialism doesn't seem important anymore!"

"Without domination and hate, what is it?"

"I know, I feel so silly! I'm sorry for everything..."

"It's all forgiven. Don't worry."

"That's all good," Lies butted in, "But what happened to these girls?"

The Japanese Queen who Anne had noticed earlier swept forward, and asked for a sketch of Ilse's character. She got one.

"Probably they were cleansed like us. But I'd guess that hate and cruelty were such a great part of their own souls, that their spirits must be entirely rebuilt."

"...I'll stay with them, if you don't mind." Bertha scuffed her feet, "Someone ought to."

More Puella Magi were appearing, although the crowd of thousands wasn't getting much larger. Anne realised that many Puella Magi had left their human forms behind already. She could still feel their minds in the air, and would have to make sure none of them found the whole multiverse lonely.

Sarah, on the other hand, had already picked up a harem of younger Puella Magi, hanging off her with gifts, stories and worshipping gazes; Anne was glad that she seemed more concerned about settling them in than flattered.

"I believe we can even make anything we want." Debbie experimentally scrawled Psalm 119 in the air with her finger.

"I suppose so—you could build your own Temple to go to every Sabbath. And a Reform Synagogue down the road you wouldn't be seen dead at!"

The old joke got a laugh from the Jewish Puella Magi, and a hug from Sarah.

Even in heaven, Anne was the joker, but she was finally content with it. With her friends and through her diary, everyone knew her true self; the ordinary girl who resisted. She finally had her Wish.

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"...I was hoping to see my father." Debbie finally mentioned.

"Don't be afraid, sister." Joan laid her hand on Debbie's shoulder, "The God who has saved us from the darkest end will not fail to provide for all his people."

"Absolutely," Cleo added, "I've no doubt Charmian is in *Aaru* right now, warm with nectar, and with a demi-god on each arms." Joan grudgingly allowed that it was possible.

"Merlin and the older druids all believed in Pythagorean Reincarnation," Nimue chipped in, "Maybe he came back as a Puella Magi!" The question of whether anyone was Merlin, and who Merlin was anyway, amused the thronging Puella Magi for some time, as Deborah went on;

"It's okay, I'm sure father's in heaven; I've finally realised, books are worth less than faith. I just wanted to see him again—maybe they allow visitors?"

"Well, we are outside physical limitation, we could probably learn anything"

Himiko seemed to wake up from a trance, "I can sense a few nearby planes of reality without losing myself; your father might be there." The Shaman-Queen was immediately mobbed by Puella Magi of every kind;

"My parents, my sister—"

"My grandfather—"

"My friend—"

"I never knew my parents but I want to—"

"Grandmother?" Sayaka, who had begun crying over Kyousuke again, looked up in wonder, "You look just like that old photograph—"

It was the eternal problem of heaven; Anne could watch her father's future and even Peter's past; but they couldn't meet. It hurt; but less than Anne had expected. Maybe because she knew they were safe, and she would never stop hoping to see them again. Maybe because she wasn't a child anymore; she had fought, endured and been justified.

"We'll find them, don't you worry," Alice clapped her hands for attention, "In the meantime, I could do with drink."

The thousands of Puella were suddenly standing on vast wet-scented lawn, covered with a patch of blue sky. Hundreds of three-chair garden tables were laid out, and on them—

"What about some wine?" Joan and Cleopatra asked almost simultaneously asked.

"Sorry, all I can do at my age is tea."

"And cake!" This from a small pink haired Japanese girl, munching cheesecake with the raised-eyebrow bliss of one who could eat cheesecake for a living. The girl in blue beside her was exploring the multiverse in a trance as deep as Himiko's; on her other side, a girl in green was contemplating a single rose.

"Ladies!" It said a lot about Alice that she could still draw unanimous attention,

"We might be here because of one sacrifice, and not our own efforts—but I don't think any of us want to forget the people we lived for, and lived for us. Parents, lovers, teachers and friends. Here's to them all, until we meet again."

"And to Madoka." Sayaka stood up, flushing as the great faces of history inclined towards her as one, "A girl just like us...who gave her life up for everybody."

Anne drank with everyone to Absent Friends. She realised nearly everyone was talking about Madoka; though she was undeniably divine and wonderful, no one knew who she was, or why she wasn't with them. Finally, Sayaka stood up again.

"Madoka told me that she wants you all to be happy...and that she's sorry she can't be here with you now. She has to everywhere, to save all the Puella Magi...and while her special friend is still fighting, she has to be at her side, to the very end."

A/N: The longest and most popular story I've written, within shouting distance of the end...I can only thank everyone who read, reviewed, favoured or discussed this story; you've made it something very special. Particular thanks to Ceres Wunderkind, Audra Vaikas (who suggested Mary and Jane), CherryBlossom-AsterMagi (who prodded me toward the idea of the two Alices), Anon Fan (who mentioned Amelia Earhart), Broth3r (who suggested

Roza Shanina) and GoldsteinM, without whom Sacagawea, Sharbat and the three Japanese Puella Magi in chapter 10 would never have been attempted. I was entirely unsure how well-received this idea would be when I started writing, and was considering a short 4 chapter affair between other projects!

The willingness of people to suggest historical girls has really been the best encouragement (apologies to those who proposed ideas I didn't manage to

use).

An epilogue will be posted in the future, describing the eventual fates of Kyubey, Homura, Pandora and Billy Kane. I've felt some temptation towards bonus chapters focusing on Roza Shanina and co, or Anne Bonney and Mary Read...but as the epilogue will definitely show, nothing lasts forever.

***Chapter 14*: Epilogue 1: The Apocalypse of Billy Kane**

Indianapolis, USA, 2014 (two years post Madoka)

Akemi Homura met Billy Kane on a bus out of Indianapolis, the morning after she killed the first Demon Prince. When the hugest miasma on record appeared, the Incubators had prepared a team; two local Puella, Hatchin and Michiko, a famously tough Irish girl, and Homura herself. The centre had been near deserted when the white behemoth tore its path to reality, thanks to a false terrorism alert hours before. Homura knew for certain that the Incubators hadn't been behind it.

" *Konichi-wa, Akemi-San.* Dreaming?"

Homura turned to the young man in the seat across who she had assumed was meditating. He was thin and very dark, though the straight hair spilling over his collar suggested white blood. He had round dark glasses, a cross and raven-feather necklace, and a South-West English accent. His face was boyish, but showed the feline assurance of one who believes they can do anything.

"Who are you?"

"I was a journalist—if you've heard of the Helmand dossier, the BMS scandal or any supernatural conspiracy, you know me. A former hacker, choirboy and mystic. 'Who now has turned to magic; seeking to know whence all proceeds and deal no more in empty reeds.'" Homura didn't get much time for reading, but she recognised Faust. She fixed Billy with the gaze that endless battles had hammered to steel.

"You could never use magic. And do you believe humans are happier for knowing things they'll never change?"

"Come on, you're a strong girl; you *know* happiness is never the point. I can tell them about genocide in Africa, or torture and lies everywhere else; people just feel shitty, and whine how they can't change any of it. They need to feel

shitty enough to change themselves."

"I did that, and it didn't change a thing. But no one ever believes until it's too late."

"Right. And who would believe in magic, even if I could tell them about you?"

Billy smiled out of the window as the bus started up, "What *about* you, Akemi-San? I heard you had a story yourself that nobody would believe."

Homura's heart trembled. "Where did you hear—who—?"

"Do you want to know, Akemi-San? Or do you want to tell me your story?"

It was her first time in two years. Homura poured out the story of Madoka she had sworn to hold onto forever, as she defended the world her goddess had made. Billy's smile was as rapt as a child biting round an apple.

On returned to Japan, Homura monitored the internet, and read about a great number of false emergencies and warnings across America associated with major demon appearances. Kyubey maintained that it was an annoyance too small for removal, but it made Homura smile, as if she wasn't alone.

The second Demon Prince appeared a year later in Saratov, Russia. Another team was sent against it, and failed. Homura and three Russians with the *noms de Guerre* of Vasilisa, Baba Yaga and Rosa Shanina finally killed it and spent a fortnight clearing attendant demons from the ruins. But after that, in hindsight, the die was cast.

New York, USA, two weeks after the Saratov Demon Prince, 2015

"Hey, Billy? Joan and Amelia I get...but Marilyn? She was just the sort of useless cow you can't stand."

Billy paused in tapping at the laptop to consider the collage of historical Puella Magi that was his Wallpaper. His eyes were bleary, but driven.

"True, she epitomised the vapid, materialist parasite. But she suffered and fought, just like you, Bridie. Her Wish was her own, even if she wasted it. She reminds me I need to understand everyone's wish, to save the world."

" *I'm saving the world, eejit. You're just the love interest.*"

Bridie Sullivan, the young woman lying on the bed in the cheap Brooklyn flat, had curled red hair and the low, lovely voice of an Irish angel. Billy had found her a few months before Indianapolis; a year after her Contract. He'd already known about Puella Magi, and deduced what she was; she'd told him about the Demon Prince, other immanent attacks, and the famous Akemi Homura. It had saved lives, and she didn't give a shit if the Incubators disapproved. It wasn't just that he was a man who knew the truth; he was clever, vulnerable, and unworldly in his feelings and thoughts as her life itself. Everything against their partnership just made it more irresistible.

"Do you want to read it? I think it might be my masterpiece." Billy passed the laptop to Bridie; she lit a cigarette and read the dossier through.

"If the Pigs banged up everyone who got out of Saratov, and locked the city down, where did you get all this? Those underground websites?"

"No, FS-KGB shut the country's internet down. I had a source who got me into Saratov, and others who found the witnesses in the prison camps."

"So if this is proof that demons attacked Saratov and Indianapolis, what good will that do people to know?"

"They won't call it a demon. But they'll know Russia lost control and crossed the line. They'll know there's something no government can do shit about.

People should know their world has changed, so they can change." Bridie looked at the exhausted, animated man beside her with some pride, and returned the laptop.

"Last question. Did you screw the Puella Magi who got you into Saratov?"

"What? What do think I am—?" Bridie laid a hand on Billy's chest, as carefully

as a tiger's paw.

"If I ever thought you were just using me for this—you do know, I'd fucking break you in half?"

"Yeah, I know, angel. Things that like really show you care."

Bridie laughed, and kissed Billy's mouth.

"Damn...If only I wasn't late for bloody work." Her green and tartan Puella Magi costume rippled over her body, as she rose and walked to the door. She paused there for a moment.

"Billy, love...whatever you really want...I think you're going to get it. Just make sure you really want it, you know?"

"Angel...what did you Wish for?"

"Thought you'd never ask. When the cat found me, I was due to spend the next six years inside. I stabbed some bastard."

"Fresh start. Good Wish, if there could ever be one."

"Yeah, good unless you fuck your new life up again. Good luck with the revolution, love."

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Billy sent the truth about Saratov to his contacts—it would be irremovable from the net within hours. Then he checked a pocket of his coat, switched the CD

player from the Pogues to a rhythmic drumbeat, lay on the bed and waited. He hadn't slept for almost 48 hours; the drums beat strangely at his head. Even if he expected the white cat, it seemed close to hallucination. He smiled like someone past the point of escape.

"Well, there you are, Ofey."

– *Mr Kane. I'm white, but hardly Caucasian, so I can't really be your Ofey—*

"Really? From the Latin for *foe*?"

– *How are we foes to you, or humans, Mr Kane? We offer a free—and completely informed—choice. Our secrecy is absolutely required for humanity's survival—*

"Well, Ofey—if you could wipe the demons out, would you do it? You don't even know where they come from. If you could end war, exploitation or sexist oppression, would you do it? You still need a world where women suffer the fear and repression that makes them stake their lives on your beads-for-the-natives Wish. You need to look after us, like any ruler, but you aren't our friends, and you don't want us free."

– *We run the best possible world for all parties, Mr Kane. Or do you think you'd run it better yourself?—*

"The world would change if it even knew about your girls. We've got tired geezers running countries, and 23 year olds farting around in college—they should see how teenage girls from Hollywood to Mogadishu save humanity. I wrote to change what I saw when I was eight; that's how a human life should be! And sexism? All the burquas, glass celings and porn companies would be *killed*, when it comes out that woman fight for us every night, without end."

– Odd that you oppose female exploitation, Mr Kane. Would you still be sleeping with a soulless puppet if she hadn't passed you secret information?–

"If she hadn't...she wouldn't be Bridie Sullivan. If she wasn't a Puella Magi, she wouldn't be the woman I love. You won't ever be getting to me through her."

– You should know that we can prevent your story getting out, Mr Kane. We've tolerated you so far, but this is beyond a nuisance. May I ask what you hoped to achieve?–

Billy grinned into the Incubator's eyes. "I want in. I want to make a Contract."

– Impossible, and rather disappointing–thought it seems all human males who discover the Puella feel their power threatened. After talking of justice and freedom, you only want power.–

"We need power to take our freedom. If humans don't want to drown under their filth within a century, they have to change. Women need to learn what they can do by themselves. Men need to learn to dream, and trust a power greater than theirs. And I know you're lying about impossible. I know men before me had magic you never gave them."

– Are you finished? Of course, what you propose is out of the question. I believe the police will arrive in five minutes, with orders to shoot you for drawing a weapon on them–yes, we really can arrange that if we have to. Miss Sullivan will soon be dead as well. I'm curious to see whether you run or pray–

Billy glanced at the cross and feather around his neck, and grinned.

"Improvise. But that's really my religion, anyway."

Billy stood up, swallowed the thing from his coat pocket and collapsed, pupils frighteningly dilated. He was faintly singing something in Haitian.

– *What you're trying to do is pointless. An unaided human has never...you can't!*–

Billy's whole body went stiff; a moan of pain pushed its way from his teeth.

Then he smiled like a newborn angel. The room seemed miles wide, filled with wondrous things and the heartbeat of the world.

The Incubators had spent some effort monitoring his intelligence gathering; but it had never been more than a useful distraction. He had learnt Kabbala, Yoga and astral meditation, but had found his grandmother's faith most free from bull and adaptable for his purpose. Rather than calling down a spirit, he just had to call out his own.

Bridie had told him everything about her transformation—from tying his heart to

hers, he knew the kind of existence he was reaching for. And the drumming, lack of sleep, and LSD had all helped him take the training of a Bokor in Soho to its ultimate purpose. He could take the lid off his mind, empty everything of his crude, frustrated human life, and will the mysterious power of the universe into filling him up.

– *Everyone! This is scenario XM! I'm going to try...*– Billy felt something cold scabble desperately at his burning mind, before the Incubator collapsed without changing expression.

A purple gem burst from Billy's chest, as the first Puer magi costume flashed into existence. When his door was kicked down, there was nothing but a window open to the night.

Manhattan, USA, same evening

"Sorry, I'm late..." Bridie had told Lin and Sheryl when she met them at the tube station, "Let's just get out there."

As Lin gave her a dirty look, she felt the warm pride of being envied. Apart from the ones with other girls, like Sheryl, all the Puella she knew were

single.

She'd learned herself, you couldn't have a relationship with men who didn't know, just sex.

They'd reached the city, and followed their Soul Gems to a man jumping from the New York Times building. Lin had pinned him in place with an arrow, Bridie had gone up on a 300-ft spear to get him down, and then the three of them had driven the demons inside the skyscraper to the roof. There had been more demons there, but it was too late to call for another team's backup.

The tip of a white claw cut Bridie's shoulder. Twisting away, she thrust her spear out the top of its head, while kicking at another demon, which shifted away. Sheryl chopped her sword through its arm, before her blue costume disappeared behind three more demons. Rather than supporting with arrows, Lin was barely defending herself from two demons. And the last four were

surrounding Bridie, claws and fangs unfolding from their white cloaks.

"Alright over there?" She called to Sheryl.

"Oh, don't worry about me!"

With a bright-eyed, dedicated fury, she struck around them with fists, feet and every part of her spear. Even between teleports the demons were armoured and tough, but she stabbed one down, and kicked another in its cluster of eye-gems as she vaulted over them and ran to Lin who had collapsed with her side ripped open. One demon turned from her to Bridie; she forced its claws down with her spear-shaft, drove her fist half-way through its rubbery head, and stabbed the other through until it collapsed with a scream.

"That was scary," Lin panted, struggling up. "Where you *whistling* then?"

"'Blood of Cuchulain' theme. Another dying warrior, tied to a rock."

Lin shot down a demon before the last two teleported onto them. Tiring but still dangerous, Bridie pushed them back from Lin, hoping that Sheryl would bloody well finish her own off and help. When Sheryl appeared behind her, *something* made her shift, and the sword went through her chest instead of her Soul Gem.

"What the *fuck*--?"

"Sorry. But you bought it on yourself, you Mick slag--"

Screaming out, Bridie wrenched herself around to fight back both the demons, and Sheryl. She felt like she was about to fall, when a dark figure rushed out onto the roof. Blotting out a patch of the city light below, he whipped a thin blade from the cane in his hand. Bridie watched, as he sliced through the last demons with a web of blows, and stepped forward.

"Angel, I'm sorry. Incubators were finally going to off me; didn't think they'd be stupid enough to go after you."

"Well, fuck them." Bridie stabbed at Sheryl again, who batted the point down, and would've slashed her if Billy hadn't leapt above them, kicking out twice, before slashing around at Sheryl's face. Her sword was much thicker, but Billy swayed and weaved around her, stabbing out until the blue Puella fell. She stared into the black lens shining above his mask; there was something wild and hypnotic in it.

"You're right, the Incubators told us to kill her. She betrayed us; you were going to tell everyone everything. We'd all have been thrown in jail, or some lab."

Billy glanced at Bridie, who shook her head. He turned to Lin, who had been too shocked and wounded to move.

"I...didn't want to kill Bridie. I won't. And I'm not going to fight Tuxedo Mask."

Nonplussed, Billy examined his costume. He was certainly wearing a black tuxedo and top hat, but his half-mask under the round shades was a skull.

All he was missing were the rum and cigars.

"This isn't Sailor Moon—this is Samedi, Voodoo god of death..."

Bridie laughed in the way that sent shivers down his spine. Billy sheathed his sword, and they embraced above the glittering Manhattan skyline.

"Oh, you daft brilliant fool. How did you—?"

"By myself, without the Incubator. It's incredible. I don't think I want *anything* now."

"That can't be—!" Sheryl protested.

"Why not? The Incubators just harnessed a power that was always ours, and only used it for hunting bogey-men. Now I can teach anybody at all to wake their magic up—the Incubators won't control a thing. This world is definitely going to change."

— Definitely. Though not from anything else you'll be doing— the white cat, Kyubey, appeared on a the roof —Sheryl Berenson and Lin Hwan Kim—the order to kill these two has become pointless. Could you please leave me to deal with them?— As Sheryl carried Lin away, Kyubey fixed Billy with a trembling red eye. Bridie stepped between them.

"Don't even think about hurting Billy. After trying to fucking kill me, you'll be lucky if we even let you go."

— Luckier than 453B, certainly. That was the name of the Incubator who went insane trying to stop you, Billy Kane. He knew mind-link with a transforming human would kill him; but it was our last chance to save your world. In the last half-hour, six teenagers have become Magi spontaneously. Six countries, both genders. Demon levels are at their highest recorded worldwide. And another Demon Prince is preparing to appear in Denver.—

Bridie and Billy's Soul Gems both went off. They looked down from the skyscraper, at huge faint clouds sweeping over New York from two sides.

"Billy," Bridie voice had edge, "What exactly did you Wish for?"

"Not that. It's not what I wanted, not exactly—"

— No human could Wish for something on this scale. It seems your Awakening has tripped a button in your race's 'collective unconscious', Billy Kane.

Uncontrolled magic has been a bomb under your race for 6000 years, and you've finally lit the fuse— Billy and Bridie shared a look without a single unmixed feeling, and then ran from Kyubey, down the tower.— You humans. If you ever used your brains, you wouldn't always be running away—

It took days for the Incubators to realise what had truly been done. Spontaneous Magi transformations worldwide had reached the millions. Demons numbers were approaching a hundred million; human and Magi casualties were rising hourly. And a second Demon Prince was arriving in Tel Aviv. The global disaster was being called an alien invasion, a mass psychotropic chemical attack, and the prelude to the end of the world— Kyubey very nearly felt agreement with the last. The Magi appearing everywhere were called divinely

gifted, demon possessed, or the evolution of humanity.

The chaos was so complete, Kyubey took a few seconds to comprehend it. His thoughts finally came out to his subordinates, evenly as they ever had.

— I believe that we can still make our quota before the end. Send those Mexican Puella, Ellis and Nadine Rodriguez, to help eliminate the Prince in Denver.

The Contracted Puella Magi must gather the new ones; normal demons must not be engaged, until we have the numbers and organisation to defeat them.

All strong Potentials must be Contracted immediately, by any means—

10B raised his paw. *—Do you mean...force?—*

– Humans cannot be forced, 10B, only persuaded. Simply explain that if they do not obey us, their parents, families, and race will quite possibly be wiped out within their present generation–

Marseille, France, 2015 (three days after the Outbreak) By thirteen, Maria Martel had wished for more things than she could remember.

She wanted to be better at piano; she wanted everyone to pass their exams together. She wanted poor Jeanne to come back soon, after she'd collapsed in a red light, screaming about soul-eating monsters on every street. She wanted the protesters all over Russia to be safe—she'd wept, when her Papa had said sending the army against them was right. She even wished the street boy who played a violin near her walk from school could have a home, food and whatever else *he* wanted.

Five minutes ago, when her parents had locked every door and set fire to the house, she had only wished for oxygen. But then the boy in the mask had come, cutting down the white monsters behind her parents with sharp wires flowing from his hands. He wore a black waistcoat, and his mask was like the Phantom of the opera; she had been scared, but when he carried her out, she'd felt safe. Now she was coming round on the lawn, beside her unconscious parents and dog, he was still beside her.

"Who are you? Don't go..."

"Don't worry. I'm staying until the ambulance gets here. I'm... the angel of music, if that's acceptable?" Maria laughed and coughed at his seriousness.

"With so many Demon attacks, they may be some time. Try to breathe properly."

"More demons? Shouldn't you go and save more people?"

"There are other Magi...I just wanted to make sure you were okay. I'm afraid I've only been doing this for about three hours." The boy had an Eastern European accent; his eyes were grey, and very still. Almost as if they'd seen so much in fourteen years, they were already tired—but he was looking straight at her, like a beautiful surprise.

"Oh no...thank you. I thought I would die, but you—"

— Hello Maria! This is a Puer Magi, a magical warrior defending the world from demons. But we need more warriors right now, to stop more parents and children dying everywhere. You can have any Wish, if you Contract and use your power to fight!—

Chafing at the ruined moment, Maria turned to the strange grey cat, and wondered if she could do what it was asking. Her bare knees wouldn't stop shaking at the picture of her parent's hopeless faces, and the demons' jaws above her head. Whatever she could do, she would do anything but face that again—if she had a choice. She looked back at her rescuer, noticing that both his arms were bleeding. Her only Wish was that he shouldn't leave her, alone beside a stinking ruin.

"You don't have to Contract if you don't want to, Maria. I'll protect you, whatever happens." Warmth burst unstoppably through her chest, as the cat shrilled on.

—D o you think this is a TV drama, David Burowski? Protecting a single human in this world is nothing but criminally selfish. Maria, people will die if you don't fight for yourself, instead of making choices based entirely on your

mating hormones!—

Maria wished she could set her dog on the cat. As it was, she disturbed both the cat and David's eyes by reaching up and kissing him.

—0—

The day after her family finishing moved into overcrowded temporary housing, three Puella surrounded Maria on her way back from the shops. They were black, Jewish and Asian, but their eyes had the same look. They told her all about the extraordinary density of suicides, riots and family murders they had seen in the last week, and exactly what they thought of Maria for refusing to Contract, in sufficient detail that she was slumped against a wall and weeping when she heard David's voice.

"Don't you see this is wrong? I can't believe that girls would bully an innocent like this."

"You sexist bastard, you think you can fight three of us?"

"I won't fight any of you; I only mean to fight demons. If you have any self-respect, please go and do the same."

Maria watched for several minutes as the lead girl laid into David. The other two seemed unwilling to properly hit him, and he rolled with the punches like someone who'd spent his life being beaten up, but he was still livid with bruises, when the lead girl aimed a kick at Maria, and he finally pulled her feet out with his wires.

"Please...don't make me." His grey eyes were as steady and silent as they had ever been.

"Don't expect anyone to work with you from now on." The Puella spat at him,

"I'd say you'll be dead within a week."

After they left, David finally slumped down. Maria hugged him very gently, sobbing.

"I suppose this is all because I waited for that ambulance. Are you okay?"

"Oh, David, are Puella Magi like *that*? But they had to face all those horrible things, and I couldn't ever do that—"

"They are like that. But you're you. And I'm me." He was smiling at Maria through the blood—it was the kind of smile that saved up scraps of happiness until it overflowed in joy.

"David...please don't die. I can even hardly believe you're here *now*."

"I've always been somewhere. I was an orphan who played violin on the street; If I'm to be a superhero who fights demons, I promised God I would do it right."

Kampala, Uganda, 2015 (ten days after the Outbreak) The Prince's jaws rose from the lake of mist, bellowing like a volcanic crater.

Paul hung a moment in the air above, before the wires around its right arm went taunt, the arrows and bullets hit its left, and Paul's foot crashed into the great white brow. He held grimly on, as it writhed, drove his fist down like John Henry's steam drill, and kept punching as the blasts and cries raged about him until it was gone.

"You kill it, brother! Strongest in the world!"

Grinning, Spider heaved Paul up and pumped his fist into the air. Jilli was holding her bow to the sky, all the other boys were embracing his barrel chest.

And around them, half of Uganda seemed to think killing was something to sing and cheer about now as well. Paul stared back, eyes dark behind his unusual mask of bandages. The girls wore rainbow-feather dresses; the boys, wooden masks and raggy tailcoats. AKs still on their shoulders, they looked like bandits who'd raided a costume party.

Paul was a warrior. If he'd been born in New York or anywhere other than DRC, he would still have been a killer, he honestly believed. He didn't even

understand the boys who cried, puked and had kill their brains with drink and ganja to fight. When the LRA Captain had pulled his father out and given Paul a gun to kill him, he might not really understood what he was doing. But he hadn't felt anything since about very much at all; when his Change had come, he had only Wished to be stronger. If there was no rest from battle at all after that, he really preferred it.

Jilli had been the battalion's other Puella Magi, but Paul had never felt much about women, or joined in when the other boys needed them; killing was all he had to do. He'd hunted alone in the jungle, and so had Jilli; he didn't really know what to say to her. The captain beat her so often anyway, Paul was surprised every morning to see her still alive.

The battalion had captured Spider on a raid into Uganda. With his skinny limbs and sleepwalker eyes, Paul had expected he would be shot or beaten to death before they even reached camp. But on the first night, Spider Changed. It might have done something in his head, because he seemed to forget about his family, and started talking.

"You got magic too. You must be strongest man in LRA?"

"Don't let they see you talk."

"Bet you strong as whole LRA together, yeah?"

"Lots of men in LRA."

"Well. Any man strong, men *follow* him, he get stronger. Like magic—he just gotta show his strength. You got a girl, brother?"

"Don't need one."

"Ah, shame. Strong man like you wouldn't let anyone hurt his girl."

The next day, Paul told the Captain he wanted Jill for his wife. The man had laughed and swung his rifle at Paul's head; after two blows that barely hurt, he caught the weapon and smashed it in half with his hand. After Paul repeated his

question calmly with a pistol held in his face, the Captain decided that a warrior like him deserved one insignificant woman.

"I'm not afraid of you." She'd told Paul. She didn't look it.

"I'm not doing nothing to you. You don't want to run?"

"Nowhere to go, family dead. Can't protect the other girls alone, either, but I still gotta be here for them. That's my punishment from God for staying alive."

After that there was a fight with the leading boy soldier that Paul won, a man beating Spider who Paul threw about ten feet, and the cow whose neck

he broke with his hands. The boys began looking at Paul with more awe than respect; there were rumours that he could break a government tank, that there was a powerful spirit in him, that he had visions like Commander Kony. Paul was bemused by these rumours, until he realised that all originated from Spider. Jilli was telling the other girls the same thing, in terms strong enough to sink through their despair, even if she hardly spoke to Paul. Two more girls had Changed, and one of the boys.

Finally, the adults decided that things had gone far enough. One morning, two whole squads had pulled Paul and Jilli out in front of the camp, told him the Captain and Colonel Obanno had been murdered, and that he had a minute to pray.

Paul was a killer. He had killed on command because it felt natural, not because he was afraid or broken—the LRA had never needed to break him. He could punch the first man so hard his neck snapped, and barely even felt satisfaction.

He couldn't die—not because of magic tree oil that deflected bullets, but because he was faster and stronger and he wanted to come out this fight alive. He ducked away from the bullets, cracking a spine with his foot and threw a man with a machete into a cluster of fighters. Jilli and the other Magi were dropping more adults with their bow, other boys were firing their guns with them and screaming. The adults and the boys with them smelt of confusion; defeat. More adults were running from their tents with weapons, but a web of razorwire was between them, and they were falling in bloody segments. An AK blew a chunk

from Paul's shoulder; even as he slapped the rifle away and punched the boy down, he strained to get a look at Spider. He had a white suit, and painted face; as the wires spilt from his hands, for once, he wasn't smiling.

One Puella died under the bullets, and a lot more boys, but Paul, Spider and Jilli did not die, and kept on killing. Most of the boys surrendered when the all the adults were beaten, but others fought to the death—at the end Paul had never smelt so much blood as they had all had in them. It surprised him how happy the girls looked as they stabbed the men again and again;

women really were surprising. Jilli regarded Spider narrowly as he grinned at her.

"You. Thought you were setting this up so you didn't have to kill."

"I done this so no one ever *order* me to kill, sister." Spider responded, "I Wish to be president of Uganda after all. Youself?"

"Hmph. I Wish to survive, whatever happen. Yours maybe better. Maybe."

Although everyone obeyed Paul with true dedication, problems quickly developed in the community of young war-criminals, especially with the girls; apart from the Puellas, many were too broken to even defend themselves. Spider had been truly grateful to hear about the Demon Prince appearing in Kampala within days, from the Incubator who turned up to swallow their Grief Cubes,.

Walking, begging and stealing transport, the LRA children had gone to the capital; more had Changed, and other Puella Magi had joined them.

Brainwashed as they been into the holy war for an Acholi state in North Uganda, there was hardly anyone unable to feel that fighting with demons was a war for the good.

—0—

For his first time as a warrior, Paul couldn't follow what was happening. Jilli was calling out to the crowd in a clear voice; Spider was moving among them, listening and touching shoulders; a chant was spreading out from him. Paul had never seen so many people gathered to make noise rather than death, but he could feel their belief. Yesterday the city-Ugandans would've scoffed at talk of spirits or magic; today children had killed a Demon before their eyes, and

something had broken out. Paul found himself swept in the crowd towards Mengo hill and the Parliament building; he felt exhausted and his head ached.

"How it feel setting up the first Puella Magi cult?" Jilli quipped at Spider as they finally trudged to the empty summer villa (Someone had donated until a real headquarters could be set up).

"No cult—a *movement*, the *Change Movement*. Food, money; no worries.

Government promise amnesty for the kids, and all the help to kill demons we need. We the only ones who can do it; only asking the people to believe. Belief make us strong, so we start telling that government to change this country—and they never ignore us. We the demon-killing, holy-spirit *superheroes*. They follow us if they want to live."

Spider laughed as he flopped to the ground. Jilli smiled down at him faintly.

All the Magi slept sound, except the three of them. Paul never more than half-slept, and he woke when Spider's parents burst into his dreams. Jilli stopped him screaming, and held his head in her arms.

"Oh Jesus...I forgot, I had to forget ...they were calling me, they—"

"You hush...you gotta keep forgetting, and remember us. And me. You an amazing boy..."

Paul saw that as Spider quickly kissed her cheek, Jilli stiffened like a corpse.

She had her own nightmares—he looked away.

"Sorry," He heard Spider, still talking, "But you more amazing. They do such terrible things to you, but you still *live*—Jilli—" Paul heard her breathe as she rocked Spider's head in her arms.

Alone outside the door, Paul tried to pick out stars from the depths of the city.

He was a warrior, a killer—it was the reason he was here, the reason everyone had survived. It was the way he had lived on; but for the first time, living felt a very empty thing. He couldn't remember who had shot

Spider's father and cut his mother down—I could have been him. Tears were running from his eyes, over

the mask that was his.

Raleigh, North Carolina, USA, 2015 (two months after the Outbreak)

Dorothy Gardener had never wished for very much. Playing the flute better, getting a good job and going to heaven when she died would all come with reasonable effort. There were things that troubled her, like what God found so bad about homosexuality, and why every church sermon about Israel never mentioned Palestine. But she was comfortable that distant problems were more than anyone could be expected to understand. Her parents, friends, God and darling little sister all loved her, which could only mean she was good.

The Outbreak stopped being distant when a boy in her class shot himself with his family, and two girls tried to slit their wrists. Her grandpa had joked about bankers queuing on top of skyscrapers in the 30's, but some streets really had been shut off after repeated jumpers. The National Guard and police were everywhere, to stop as many as they could and take the other kind of victim away. Pastor Culpepper and the church elders were tirelessly exorcising the Changed, even after a youth leader's jaw had been broken. The Gardeners and everyone else were locked in homes together. They prayed for days, that Jesus would have mercy on the poor souls in Denver, Russia, Tel Aviv and everywhere else; that he would come and drive the demons out. Dorothy had never believed demons were everywhere; now they demonstrably were, she was finally looking forward to the end of the world. She was sure her parents would stop being so stressed and pay attention to her and Molly then.

Pastor Culpepper did gather the congregation for one special service, after the invasion of Israel was ended by the Golan Heights H-bomb. He told the church without visible uncertainty that Israel was authorised by God to defend her survival, just like America. If the Arabs had thought the Denver and Tel Aviv disasters had crippled both countries, they were wrong. He was overjoyed at this sign that the end of their suffering was near.

About a dozen people Walked Out Of Church. Even if Dorothy stayed, she realised things would never be the same again. Then she turned as yellow light

blazed from her sister's chest.

There was screaming among the prayers; the pressing hands would have crushed Molly, if Dorothy hadn't shielded her. That afternoon, her parents obeyed the government order for the Changed, and delivered Molly to what they called a

'residential hospital' so she could be protected, and her condition understood.

Dorothy could only stop the crying by giving Molly her own favourite teddy bear from nursery school, and saying that Edward would be with her when her big sister couldn't be.

There was talk of sending more troops to the Middle East. More suicides, every day in every city. News stories about Changed robbing a bank, attacking police and government facilities. The famous photo of the schoolgirl gunslingers who'd travelled from Italy to stand between protestors and the Russian army, in their fancy dresses. There were Changed who fought off lynch mobs, in Africa and the US Bible Belt.

Rumours were surfacing that the Changed had caused the mass suicides, the Denver and Tel Aviv disasters and even the Israeli H-bombs. When a Michigan hospital was attacked by a militia calling the Changed secret government mutants, the Gardeners were told that all Changed were being moved to secure locations for their safety. Her parents complained, but Dorothy knew they'd been visiting Molly less and less.

After weeks that seemed like years, the Big Leak finally came. Dorothy read with the rest of America the witness accounts of every Demon Prince since Indianapolis. How the FBI and government had suppressed it all, while lying at every turn about the scale of the deaths. Their helplessness to stop them with troops, science or anything. And she read about what scientists had started doing to the Changed.

"I Wish that my sister could be normal again—and safe forever. I'll fight demons, sell my Soul, or anything."

— *An excellent Wish, since your power will be far greater than your sister's.*

The Contract is complete—

The yellow gem burst through her chest in agony. An hour later, her parents were silently watching as the police led her out to the van. Dorothy's last regret was that would look on her as a vicious monster, when she'd never wanted anything but love. And to protect the ones who loved her; maybe that was why she was dressed as a bear.

At a disused asylum in the hills re-secured to hold Puella Magi, Dorothy cooperated so charmingly, no need was felt to keep her too drugged to transform. She memorised the layout and a few security codes and relayed it all to an Incubator. Within a few hours, the team of Magi who had trailed the van from Raleigh blew down the wall with a shotgun as big as a car.

—0—

"We didn't hurt them! Only psychological studies of power stimulation, and conditioning....it's ridiculous that children should have such power! We had to control it, to save—!"

"You stupid, bloody, wanker..."

The head researcher crashed into the wall under the red-haired woman's slap.

Dorothy had seen her leap around the fire from a guard's rifle, and kick him head over heels like something from *The Matrix*; she'd never believed people so angry existed anywhere. As she kicked the man a few times, the teenage boy with the white suit and shotgun sighed and lit a cigarette. Two more girls, blonde and brunette, had corralled the security guards with swords and a crossbow. The freed Puella Magi huddled in the office, all un-Contracted and weaker than Dorothy, looked somewhat frightened.

"Miss Dorothy?" The white suited boy had a Southern accent and warpaint instead of a mask, "I'm Tom Jackson, that there is Bridie Sullivan; those two go by Buffy and River. We sure owe you for your good work, today. Could I ask you as well to help put these good folks at their ease?" Blushing at his self-possessed earnestness, Dorothy succeeded in calming everybody, and healing those who had injuries. She'd resisted simply Wishing to be loved, but there was something lovable in itself about a bear costume. Molly hadn't spoken yet,

but only clung to her waist.

"Right, you horrible bunch of townie prats," Bridie addressed the crowd in her beautiful Irish lilt, "There's a war on, and your time as civilians has just ended.

You will fight in groups with older Puella Magi, who've killed more demons than you've ate hamburgers. But you *will* kill demons, or your Soul Gems will run down, and you will die. Questions?"

A tough-looking young man with a domino mask and blue mess jacket raised his hand.

"Question. I can accept that the demons have to be killed, but on what authority can you order minors into battle? Are you an organisation opposed to the government?"

"We're working on organisation, opposed to demons and stupid gits," Bridie stated, "And since only we can fight this battle, we have to command it as well."

"You have to command? I was third in my class at Oak Ridge Cadet School.

You, Ma'am, are not even American. It should be clear that some changes are in order."

Bridie glanced at Tom, who had pulled his straw hat over his eyes. She smiled at the cadet, and spoke even more softly than usual.

"Ah, for sure, I didn't even finish school, but this is a fairly simple war. It's mainly a question of noticing something, when the enemy's strong enough to stuff your own head up your arse." Bridie's eyes looked more like a wild tiger's than anything else. As the cadet duly backed down, Dorothy sighed with relief.

"I'm sure you'll find a leading role back in your hometown, Sir." Tom broke in,

"Anything else?"

"I...I just want to go home..." A small girl in a rabbit outfit sobbed. Tom levelled his shotgun at her feet—the girl instantly sprung into the air, hitting him in the head with a desperate kick. Laughing, Tom dodged away from more

blows and caught her shoulder.

"Miss, you don't know the strength you got! You go home or anywhere, but no question—you got power to fight. Great power, and great responsibility. You think on what that means—think on your folks, or sweethearts, and think on what those demons do. It's still hard, but that most always helps."

At night fell, the freed Puella Magi set off for their homes; with nation-wide rioting against the government, the 'mutants' and the demon attacks, Dorothy realised that they would probably arrive home free, to join the war that had once been a secret. She asked Tom what his team would do.

"We can't noway fight the demons, Uncle Sam, and those folk who take us for aliens all together. We'll certainly have to strike some deal. Luckily, this is America, where they say any boy who want to can reach the White House.

Rather than have Miss Sullivan do the talking there, I'd like it if you could come with us, Miss Dorothy. Folks most always take a liking to bears."

"Sis!" Molly gazed up from her waist, "I want to come with you!" Smiling, Dorothy disentangled her, and petted her head.

"I came here to keep you safe, Molly. Maybe it was selfish, but I just love you too much. I'll take you home to Mom and Dad, and you can live happily ever after." She turned back to the other Puella Magi, "I'll guess I'll talk to the President for you, Tom. It is crazy, but you're the first people I've met this month who seem to know what the future's going to be."

"I'd honestly say you should call him, Miss Sullivan," Tom told Bridie hours later; she was driving their Ford Transit on the freeway north; all the other Puella were asleep, "No government would ever listen to kids in any country, if your Billy hadn't gone and told the world what a fix they're all in, with that Leak. He ought to be in on this."

"No. It ought to be you, kid, not him. He wasn't trying to fuck the world up this bad, or kill all those people...but accidentally is almost worse. I don't think I could see him again without kicking him all the way back to England...

he's just too much of an incredible bastard."

"Magnificent. Magnificent bastard. Seriously, you should do something... about her."

Tom's eyes dropped to Bridie's stomach. When he looked up, her eyes were glistening with tears.

"I know I should...get rid of it, but I bloody well can't. And I can't stop fighting, now—I just have to keep us alive, whatever it takes. I can't even hesitate or we both die."

"Couldn't you..." Tom swallowed miserably, "Tell him...?"

"I can't. I don't want her to know..."

And, Bridie admitted silently, wiping her eyes, she didn't know herself what new global revolution Billy might use a Puella Magi child in.

Beijing, China, 2016 (6 months after the Outbreak) As a successful statesman, the Chinese Premier was as used to ripping advantage from other

statesmen as a top fighting dog. He still had trouble with Kyubey's plain red eyes, and cheerful voice in his head.

– Semi-autonomous Magi organisations have been recognised by numerous countries, Premier Jao. The Change Movement in central Africa, Joan's Young Guard in France, the Minutemen and Vampire Slayers in America... the list goes on. It took another revolution, but now Russia has the Night Witches as well. The Magi are fighting demons, and policing rogue elements themselves; fatal demon attacks have finally stopped increasing. The American and Russian organisations, as well as the Israeli Puella Magi, are largely responsible for preventing a nuclear war. Your country has remained curiously unresponsive to recent events, Premier Jao–

"We understand we cannot take such measures again. We have our own Puella Magi organisation!"

– No, what you have is a government organisation comprised of Puella Magi, several schools, a prison and military bases through your country. I understand your instinct to control a valuable resource, but harsh indoctrination and forced battle drain Soul Gems faster than anything in our considerable experience. Puella Magi have demanded autonomy from you before now and you've treated them much as you do human dissenters. So I am here to ask again that you manage your Magi rationally–

"I refuse! The Mulan Corps is a vital tool for China's future prosperity. The nation will collapse if its power is given to children. Half of them are from the villages! As we need more, we will replace our losses."

– As you wish. Incidentally, I hear you ensure the Mulan Corps' loyalty by taking possession of their Grief Cubes. If they were to be lost, your tool would suffer serious damage–

"I have matters to attend to. This interview is over, alien."

Kyubey silently disappeared. A prickle of uncertainty crept over the Premier's scalp, and he sent orders for Grief cubes to be contained at a minimal number of secure facilities.

A week later, the grief built up in the stockpiles of Cubes unconsumed by Incubators gave birth to four new Demon Princes, including one in Beijing. The Party Committee and 90% of the central government were killed, as well as 60% of China's Puella Magi. The survivors of the Mulan Corps reformed themselves as an anti-government group.

Haiti, 2016 (ten months after the Outbreak)

"So that's what happened in China? You really are still bastards, killing a million people with lies..."

— He never asked. You humans never do—

Billy Kane tipped the glass of Lamb's Rum down his neck. He poured another

double, before throwing a bag of Grief Cubes onto the bar, which Kyubey frisked about to collect. He grinned wretchedly at a newspaper announcing the new head of the British Magi's 'Ministry of Magic' as the self-Awakened wizard Alan Moore. The Legion d' Honour was being conferred on a heroic Puella called Francoise Oscarina Jarjays.

— Are you pleased with the world you've made, Billy?—

"Is Akemi-San?"

— It's as hard to tell as always. Her excursion to North Korea five months ago, when their possession of nuclear weapons came out, was discharged with her usual efficiency. Miss Sullivan isn't doing so well, if you wanted to know—

"Don't tell me," Billy groaned, and necked another glass, "I don't have a right to even hear about her. With everything that's happened, she probably

won't forgive me, ever. But humans have to sacrifice to save the world, you know?

Whether it's becoming a goddess, or the god of death."

– *Surely, you didn't know this would happen when you Awakened?*–

"Once I took the magic, I meant to spread it myself; it would have spread. Just didn't know it would spread this fast."

– *There's one thing I don't understand, Billy. You knew for certain before you Awakened that anomalies such as Cain and Jesus had already developed magic themselves. Bridie didn't know that, nor does Homura. I am aware of no one who knows, apart from us*–

"I had a source." Kyubey regarded him carefully.

– *Your source probably also got you into Saratov, to gain the evidence of the Demon Prince there that has caused such trouble. I suspect they were also responsible for Israel's nuclear attack, since the Israeli President certainly gave no order, and rumours persist of a Puella Magi's responsibility for that disaster. All these actions indicate the single motive of completely destroying the human race*–

"You still think that's what's happening?" Billy emptied the bottle of rum into his glass, and raised it. A tragic grin cracked his face.

– *80% of the next generation are going to Awaken in their teens, Billy, and most of them will have vanished before twenty. Also, we have finally confirmed that Magi population and the rate of demon increase are rising in proportion*–

"Here's to a magical world, then. The final act of earth's history."

A/N: The Federal Security Service (FSB) is the Russian FBI, and (in Billy's eyes) spiritual successor to the KGB. The Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), are a central African rebel/terrorist group notorious for kidnapping and indoctrinating children to act as soldiers or 'wives' (domestic and sexual

slaves). The LRA, like its predecessor, the Holy Spirit Movement, is structured as a cult, practising magical rituals to convince its 'soldiers' they are invulnerable to bullets. The leader is touted as a visionary medium of the Holy Spirit, in a fusion of Christian 'spiritual gifts' with African traditions of spirit mediums. I don't think I would have dared write the Magi into this context if I hadn't already put them in Auschwitz.

Incidental references are made to Michiko to Hatchin, El Cazador de Bruja, Rose of Versailles, Gunslinger Girl, Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Firefly .

Bridie is lifted from The Ruby in the Smoke by Phillip Pullman, David and Maria were inspired by I am David . The African Magi are inspired by Peter Dickinson's book AK , and the comic Unknown Soldier . Tom Jackson is derived from a great American novel I scarcely need to mention, while Billy's origins, bar the Morpheus references, are too obscure to merit discussion. I solemnly promise that the next chapter will have more anime cameos, but a lot more of Homura as well, and finally conclude the story.

***Chapter 15*: Bonus chapter: Pandora, Anne, and Mary**

A/N: Though I finally couldn't resist a bonus historical chapter, the final epilogue is written, and will be posted after a short period.

Sampson Cay, the Bahamas, 1720

No one had lived on the Exuma islands since the natives had been shipped *en mass* to the Barbados plantations. The few pirates still preying on commerce in the twilight years of swashbuckling often rested or lay low along the chain of sweltering beaches, but rarely for long and very rarely at Sampson Cay. There were dark rumours—and even the name stirred dusty biblical memories of unmanned and broken strength.

Anne Bonny knew there would be more rumours after she saw the sea serpent at night between Great Exuma and the Cay. The dark, gleaming tower vanished within a second into the all-consuming sea, and never reappeared, though Anne hit Mark Read in his mouth next morning for saying she'd screamed. The newest pirate on the *Revenge* had a fresh wound on his forehead, supposedly got when the ship's boat had lurched in the

night. It was a tiny craft on a wide blue sea, but ideal for Bonny and Read to sail to Sampson's Cay alone, while the *Revenge* was on Great Exuma for some days taking on provisions.

Anne had run away to sea with pirate captain Calico Jack Rackham at 17. She had never hidden her gender—her mass of Irish red hair was loose and her shirt half-open in the heat—but Read couldn't imagine anyone giving her trouble for long. A steel in her eyes was anything but wholesome—Read had heard from several crewmen how Anne had stabbed her father's servant girl to death at 13

over a forgotten argument.

""Yer not worried how our Captain might shoot you dead for carrying his woman off, Mark?" Even her most restful smiles had a hint of aggression.

"For sure, I think I'll manage. Yer not worried for yerself on what yer husband might think? Even with pirates, it's always the woman who gets the worst of it."

"Ah, sod that. Sod all that men and woman stuff, an' sod *always*. Whatever I am, I'm gonna do what the hell I like. Yer a man, and spent all your time killing Frenchies in the war, for pennies. Man or woman, rich or poor, life's nothing but what ye do with it."

"Truer words, Anne-girl. Truer words." Mark Read smiled grimly, and brought the boat's sail around to send it into the shore. He appeared to be a thickset young man with dark-longish hair and a very nice complexion for one approaching 30. As Anne had heard, Read had spent about six years in the British army before heading out to the West Indies and drifting into piracy.

Mark's face often looked so calm, Anne had to recall herself he'd seen more dead men in battle she would by pirating until she was sixty. She heard he had a temper when roused as well, and was looking forward to seeing it.

"Anyhow, we're sailing back to the *Revenge* with treasure, ain't we? Though what lubber would dump it on some island, rather than spend on guns or

drink?"

"This treasure could've been here from before there were guns, or even iron to make 'em. If the stories are true."

"What did yer call it? Pandora's box? Worth something, is it?"

"Pandora's urn. And there might not be enough gold in all the world."

"Well, let's look lively then! Yer got a map or something?"

"Something." Mark Read tightened one fist on a red Soul Gem, as the two pirates secured their boat and splashed through the shallows towards the beach, flawlessly white and alluring in the sun.

Greece, pre-800BC

Pandora, meaning all-gifted, may have been a prophetic name or an assumed one. It seems that the woman who would become the first Angel was exceptionally gifted from birth, but undistinguished in her birth or marriage (even the myths preserve the dullness of her husband). So her hopes and ambition far exceeded any achievements of her life, when the white cat came to her. In the incautious period before Abrahamic religions had spread fear of magic, the Incubators operated more or less openly, particularly in Babylon with its institutional sacred prostitutes, and Greece. Hundreds of Greek women had given birth to heroes with their Wishes, before become goddesses, and then monsters, themselves. Rather than follow this path exactly, Pandora Wished for the highest development of every knowledge and gift humans would ever possess.

Though she was never made a king, she dominated everything she cared to in every city she had ever passed through. When she grew weary of hunting Witches, other Puella gave her their Grief Seeds—her fascination and charm could command any devotion she wished. Her knowledge raised Greece into the bronze ages, from mud huts to stone cities. But the development stopped far short of her limitless capacity.

Anything Pandora did herself, in battle, athletics, or arts was entirely perfect and unchallenging. Ruining or benefiting the lives of others only gave satisfaction as far as their narrow capacities could be manipulated. As far as humanly possible, she had everything and understood everything; like Solomon, she was sure that there would never be anything new under the sun. But she was not content with it.

Lesser Magi made arsine, unimaginative Wishes, struggled with impossible tasks, and filled the lives before their shameful fates with senseless personal suffering. Even tortured to the limits of Pandora's ingenuity, something never stopped struggling—hope never stopped reaching for something better that did not exist, while refusing even to alter their Wishes at her own perfect suggestion. Having identified the same hope as the cause of her own suffering, Pandora decided to destroy it.

More as a preliminary experiment than a serious solution, Pandora drew all the

Puella Magi in Greece to her, and sometimes only by speaking with them, induced every one to become a Witch. It was simple, with her perfected scientific knowledge, to begin plagues and famines throughout the country; hope gave birth to more Puella Magi, more Witches, more despair. By the time of the Trojan War, the age of gods and heroes in Europe was ended. Ordinary people suffered as if suffering had just been invented.

If Pandora had become a Witch, her own suffering might have lessened, and ended in either her death or the world's destruction. However her willpower, magical strength and even her indefatigable hope were as perfect as her understand of utter human futility. She became another cold, intelligent creature beyond a Puella Magi, between a Witch and a pure spirit; an Angel.

Understanding utter despair, but not consumed by it. With every earthly suffering gone out of her urn-shaped Soul Gem, except hope. While her persuasive powers had previously been phenomenal, she found that she could now persuade anyone of anything with simple words, almost as if total domination of humanity was her second Wish.

Whatever she did to humans they hoped; she could not eliminate the irrational untruth that they might one day show an inch of progress. The only way to eliminate hope was to eliminate humanity. With the patience of immortality and the desire to remain absolutely hidden, she worked through the two main possibilities of Witches and Wishes for human extinction, travelling everywhere in the world where Magi and Witches could be gathered. The former project culminated, in a certain universe, with the creation of Walpurgisnacht. Then in a later universe, another avenue opened up when Pandora met Billy Kane.

Sampson Cay, the Bahamas, 1720

Anne and Read climbed over the broken rocks at the back of the beach and forced their way through the jungle, and thick rotting smell of plant life. There were no paths through the ferns and twisted trees, but it wasn't so thick they had to use their cutlasses. Anne noted trails that might have been left years ago by other humans, and long since overgrown.

"Where be we headed, Mark?"

"Just need to look around. What we're looking for ought to jump right out at us."

The pirates had circled the island once before Anne leaned into Read's chest unmistakably, fastening her hand on his clenched fist—Read pulled his hand away and stepped back.

"Anne-girl? What in the hells are yer doing?"

"Yer didn't go to sea 'cos yer a Molly, did yer? Ya took me out to this island, and I'm bored. Aren't yer gonna do something, if yer any kind of a man?"

"And the Captain? Yer husband?"

"If we come back with treasure, he won't even care. If we don't, then we might as well make something of this trip. Yer a better man than Calico Jack anyway.

At least I thought that."

Eyes burning, Anne unholstered her flintlock and pulled the hammer back, as Read finally saw the red mark of a Witch's Kiss blossoming on her neck.

Grabbing Anne's gun arm and throwing her across the clearing, Read punched out at the invisible creature behind her. A red corset and britches flashed over her body, and she was firing a musket. The Witch dived back into a cavern that opened up to admit it; Mary Read and, barely, Anne Bonny, jumped in after it.

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"Where...where the hell did yer put them tits, Mark?" The Witch's Kiss had been interrupted, making Anne sane but momentarily woozy. "What just happened?"

"It's Mary, poppet. And yer shouldn't even be here. Ordinary folk shouldn't even spy all this—" They were in a cavern with a black river down the centre. Torches along the walls were hung with bones, and the walls ran with dark, blood-

smelling liquid. Anne could hear drunken singing. She stared at Mary's raw-boned, handsome, but equally bewildered face, and clapped a hand to her head.

"That fuck-damned-scurvy-gobshyte white cat! Yer one of his women, aren't ye?"

And this is one of them Witch Barriers"

"What—yer know what this is? That little wanker tried making a Contract with yer before?"

"When I was thirteen; and I told him to fuck off. I wasn't about to sell my freedom for anything. He even Contracted a lass I liked, so she'd push me into it—and she didn't stop trying to force me, until I stabbed her. So don't think I'm afraid of your witchcraft!"

– *Certainly, you've no need to be afraid with your Potential, Anne Reed*–

The white cat walked from the shadows, tail whisking. The two pirates asked him as one what in seventeen fucking hells he wanted; his poise remained visibly undisturbed. –*As you may have guessed, Anne, Pandora's Urn is an artefact of Magi legend, said to attract Witches. Quite worthless for a human, but with the value of life itself to Puella Magi. I can tell you that the Witches around it are too strong for you to defeat alone, Mary. Won't you admit that you recognise this girl's Potential, and need her to fight by your side?*–

"Wouldn't I have told her the truth, if that was it?" Mary shook her head, dark hair falling around her shoulders, "Witches would just run and hide if a Puella Magi came here alone. I needed a human with me to draw them out. That was all it was." Anne drew her hand back with a snarl, but Mary caught her arm.

Anne felt inhuman strength in her grip, and saw it in her eyes. "So, I've done bad things. Ain't you done some bad things, Anne girl? Whatever the hell we want—that was yer words. So stay mousey quiet right here, like a good girl, or fight yer heart out and die. Your choice."

"Some bloody choice."

Anne followed Mary into the Barrier; the white cat followed them at a distance.

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Before covering much distance, the cavern floor became buried in coin, jewels and art objects. Something red and iron-smelling bubbled beneath them like the crust of a golden swamp. Even Anne knew enough not to try taking any, but as they stepped onto it, the hand of a skeleton rose from the underground river.

"Now, why be I not surprised?" Mary muttered, summoning a rank of muskets.

Pirate skeletons in their bandanas and tricorne hats burst from the piles of gold, and she fired away. Anne instinctively moved behind her, sending a burst of smoke into the tunnel as she fired her own pistol. She chopped frenziedly at the skeletons and took down a couple, but they were faster than humans and far tougher. One slashed at her arm, and she lost her pistol; before it could split her skull Mary smashed it with a kick, and swung a musket through two more.

"Why d'ye ever come into a Barrier, ye stupid bint? Get their attention and yer'll die!"

Anne couldn't stop, while blood boiled in her eyes and sang in her arms, until the fight was won she had no other thought. Mary finally belted her lightly round the head, and her fury subsided. They had reached an even larger cavern; Anne saw the skeletons were gone; they were now surrounded by shambling figures entirely made from treasure. There were tunnels leading up to light, but to a bleak volcanic island, and barred by one-eyed giants.

– A Greek Witch, and at least two local Witches. You're strong, Mary, but not that strong–

"Shut your trap, gobshyte."

Anne watched as Mary summoned a host of muskets, and volleyed off more firepower than a regiment of foot with both hands at once. As a Cyclops surged through the barrage and struck out, Mary grabbed Anne's waist, leapt away, reduced two Familiars to showers of coin with punches and kept firing, spitting curses with her bullets all the time.

Anne realised that her heart was racing, like a horse trying to overtake a train.

At least part of it was awe for a power beyond anything she could stand besides.

It was almost enough to sell her soul and freedom for. Almost.

Panting, Mary took Anne's hand and raced through the remains of the familiars to where the underground river disappeared. Anne hardly had time to hold her breath before they dived in. Going under water and rock was the worst part of the whole passage, especially when she felt that Mary wasn't actually breathing.

She did feel her strike out several times at things in the water she was grateful she couldn't see.

Before her lungs exploded like boiling beer casks, they surfaced in a final cavern.

Anne spat water, gasped, and looked up at the devil.

It was black, with blue-black beard to its feet, a bandolier of pistols, and a tricorne hat lost in the cavern's roof, but Anne knew what it was. She had known, though it had never mattered before now, that she had sinned beyond any absolution, and was going to hell whether she sold her soul or not. It crashed down on her that she had brought herself there.

As large as the devil, a crowned mermaid with a trident reclined in the water behind her. A gigantic one-eyed squid stirred beside it, and a colossal golden idol completed the set. Anne buried her face in the dirt,

"Mother o' God, Mother o' God, Ave Maria, full of grace..."

"Anne, get up!" Through a soft mist of terror, Anne saw Mary summon a cannon and blast a huge chunk from the golden idol. "I'm sorry, Anne-girl—"

Mary barely avoided the huge fish-tail and tentacles, but the devil's hand knocked her across the cavern. Anne stumbled after her, choking out to the white cat that she Wished—

"Don't worry about her, Anne Bonny. Those creatures have enough remaining intellect to avoid killing her until she becomes another Witch."

A woman more beautiful than Anne had even imagined appeared in her mind, reclining on a couch. Her black wings, deep with ungodly shapes,

rose above

her, and Anne realised that she had never had any idea what the devil was.

" Let me tell your Wish. I am Pandora, I have all gifts and all understanding.

Wouldn't it be better for everyone in the world, if you Wished for their lives to end?"

All the Witches were only watching her; it was obvious that Pandora, not a box or urn named after her, had drawn and controlled them. She had drawn Mary here, by a force more potent than rumour. And if she had asked Anne in that divinely charming voice to cut her own stomach open, become a nun, or slit Mary's throat, she would have cheerfully done it all.

But Pandora could not determine her Wish. Beyond ordinary choice, the Wish was an expression of her soul and destiny. She might be a stone-cold looter and killer, but she loved life to the depths of her piratical soul. Anne Bonny, in her present universe, could only make one Wish.

"I Wish to be as strong as this silly cow here. I Wish that we'll always sail together, and bloody well protect each other."

Red light flashed over the four Witches. There was a Sabre in Anne's fist, and a red dress on her body as extravagant as any of Black Bart or Captain Kidd's brocade coats.

" Not just an inferior Wish, but a pathetically banal thing to sell your soul for." The beautiful voice was receding, "You'll curse it within a year."

"Maybe so, and maybe me soul's worth little enough, but it's mine!" Anne shouted, hoping the Angel could hear, "We don't regret, we live and fight!"

Leaning on a musket, Mary got to her feet beside Anne. Then they charged at the devil, with a scream Anne hoped they could hear from Puerto Rico to Florida.

"Whatever Pandora be, she'd probably have a Grief Seed the size of yer fist."

Mary gazed at the stars from the beach of Sampson's Cay, and ran Grief Seeds between her fingers. "Still, we're both alive."

"I should hope so." Anne winced as she removed her shirt to get at some of her wounds, "If that she-devil really is thousands of years old, and wants to wipe out everyone, why in hell is everyone still living?"

"She don't want to get spied by us or them white cats?"

"She's too much of a lazy swab, yer mean. I could tell from hearing her, she barely has the spunk to do a damn thing anymore. I'd rather go to Davy Jones'

locker tomorrow than end like that. What's the point of life, if it ain't doing?"

"Aye, aye. Whether we're women or Puella Magi, anything we want."

"Mary...yer let me come here, because you really thought I should become a Puella Magi, didn't yer?"

"God forgive me, but aye. It's a devilish hard fight. But there ain't so many women in this bloody world with the spunk to do anything they want. So if we fight as Puella Magi, it might make up for all the bloody things we seem to do ourselves." Anne thought for a moment, and gave a more contented smile than Mary had ever seen from her. She grinned back, and threw Anne three Grief Seeds, "The ones yer killed. I had the one from that sea serpent, so I'm grand."

The two pirates lay together a minute as Anne continued to bind her injuries,

"Where d'ya get flogged, Anne? Not on the *Revenge*?"

"On land," Anne glanced at the old scars across her own back, "I was married when I met Calico Jack, and James Bonny had me whipped for

adultery, the bastard."

"Ack, men can be true bastards."

"Well, yer were a man for long enough, Mark Read! Where *did* ye put them tits all that time?"

"Strapped 'em up—got used to it. I been Mark Read since I was four, pretending

to be me dead brother to get an inheritance. Then I joined up. Then I met Carel in Holland and wore a dress for about the first time when I married him. We ran an inn for a few years, and then he died of consumption. And that was my Wish over and done with."

In silence, Anne rolled towards Mary, and rested her head on a firm shoulder.

Finally, she whispered in her ear.

"Well, Mary, I mean for me Wish to last for as long as we can make it. And I really don't mind seeing yer pillows around, so start wearing a dress again, would ya? Britches can be useful, aye, but a magical girl should wear a nice frock sometimes."

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Less than a year after Mary Read joined the *Revenge* it was captured by pirate hunters, and most of the crew hanged in Jamaica. Dubious sources record that Anne survived through a combination of pregnancy and family connections, living a long and (to outward observers) respectably feminine life in South Carolina. Mary Read was recorded to have died in prison from unknown causes.

Stories exist that she faked her death and escaped to raise her own family with Anne, but there are always stories about pirates.

So it will not go amiss to add another one. That Anne never told Mary what Pandora had told her about the origin of Witches. That Mary's life as a

Puella Magi did end in the Jamarican prison; but that by the terms of Anne's Wish, she did remain at her side. That Mary dispatched the humans who hunted Anne, and Anne fought off the Magi who hunted Mary. That Anne Bonny and the ghost of Mary Read escaped to the American Colonies, and lived for as long as they could keep living.

***Chapter 16*: Epilogue 2: Twilight of the gods**

A/N: I'll begin this ending by re-thanking everyone who reviewed, offered ideas, and gave so much encouragement through this story. I almost wish there was more to write, but it looks like this is it. A warning must be issued that this final chapter goes to some length in finishing off subplots and covering things I somewhat wanted to cover. Skimming the bits that don't involve Homura would be a forgivable strategy, though Tatsuya and Yuma come up frequently as well. With respects to Kim Newman and the World Newton family, I'm ending a historical free-for-all with a literary Massively Multiplayer Crossover. New Magi drawn from other works include; Mitsuko Souma (Battle Royale), Alice (Kami-Sama no Memochou), Yuu Kamishiro (Holyland manga), Ellen, (Requiem for the Phantom), Billy Casper (A Kestral for a Knave), Victorique De Blois (Gosick), Altena (Noir), Oscar Francois De Jarjays (Rose of Versailles), Integra Wingates Hellsing (Hellsing).

Hyderabad, India, 2025 (Ten years after the Outbreak) In the beginning were the words.

1. "I'm Kaname Madoka. Just call me Madoka!"

Homura knew it wasn't a line to build religion on. She'd never believed she could express the baptising agony when Madoka had died for her—the very first time. The 64 timelines where she had drowned, decayed and bled, but Madoka had never changed. The heart of courage, above her valley of shadow. Her love, her aim, her idol, her goddess, her friend and hope forever. She'd told Billy Kane what she could, and the world had changed. But she'd never had words enough to release the light she carried through her battles, to the world Madoka had saved. It had saved her, and that was miracle enough.

1001. "Homura-chan, Puella Magi fulfil hopes and dreams! I'm sure there will be a true miracle soon. There must be."

But now, Durga, Shiva, Kali and blue-skinned Krishna were standing atop the Charminar monument, with mildly amused lips. More Hindu Magi, dressed in godly regalia or Bollywood costumes, along with ranks of soldiers and several of the new Drone Walkers, were leading columns of Muslims POWs from the ruins.

"It's literal Avatarism, you know?" watching the scene with Homura, Billy Kane gestured at the Magi with the shape of gods, "Their Magi forms echo their dreams and the myths they believed in, just like me with old Samedi's hat and cane. Be glad the Voodoo death god hasn't got a billion believers puffing me up into a messiah."

In a few years, the small core of Avatar Magi had been propelled to rulers of India by a populace that far preferred incarnate gods of miraculous power to corrupt politicians. The suppression of Indian religious minorities and war with Pakistan had inevitably followed. Magi infiltrators, led by Rama, Sita and Hanuman the monkey king, had neutralised virtually all Pakistan's nuclear weapons pre-emptively, winning the morale war that essentially *was* the war as long as magic ran off emotion. Suicide attacks by Muslim Magi had done damage, but the indoctrination required usually just drained Soul Gems before their deployment. Conversely the world's oldest religion was frighteningly compatible with human gods.

"Madoka never wanted worship. She never even asked for life. She'd tell those fake gods..."

"How to become real gods, I hope. That was always the purpose of magic."

Billy grinned at Homura, and tapped his shades, "Since we were naked in caves, we've wanted to grow up, and run this shit world better. Or escape to someplace wider, before we get drowned, fried or Demoned within another century. When you told me about Madoka, I knew she was how humans—the 80% of us with magic, in time—are going to break out this universe, to extra-dimensional heaven, beyond entropy. Magical humans are going to surpass humanity, and leave the Incubators behind in this dying prison.

Those *Ofey* will finally envy us. Our childhood is going to end. And now you know my nefarious masterplan."

Homura remained expressionless. "Puella Magi protect ordinary human lives.

You don't understand that any more than those fakes up there."

"I'm here with you and the other Observers, aren't I? To make sure these Muslims don't get massacred, and Demons hunting keeps going while the natives are warring?"

"You are. But while Bridie is still alive, and your daughter growing up, you should be with them as well."

"Damn, the Angel of Death is offering me advice." Billy looked away, "I'm still a villain to them. No telling what I might do."

"Homura? Billy?" Mitsuko's voice in their heads, *"There's a big Miasma on the move downtown."* Pre-Outbreak it would have been a Miasma gathering, before a permanent deathly cloud had put every human settlement under effective siege,

"Care to join me?"

"How could I say no, love?" Flourishing his sword-cane, Billy set off at a run, as Homura prepared to spread her wings.

Tokyo, 2027 (twelve years after the Outbreak)

There was a large demonstration outside the Magical Senshi centre (Several bombings in the Toyosu area by radical Anti-Magi protesting the Pakistan war had lowered rents, allowing the Japanese Magi Organisation to acquire a converted hypermarket for their base). Head Senshi Alice Fujishima, a pale little 14yr old precog Magi with a love for soft toys, was using several monitors to watch the crowds. She noted Sailor Moon cosplayers with green zombie makeup, and placards like 'Government, not child soldiers', 'Resist the aliens', and 'End child slavery'.

"If any staff have to leave, ensure that Security go with them." As her assistant finished the call quickly, and asked if she'd foreseen a further abduction, she shook her dark head, "But that future depends on us showing alertness, dunderhead. Another Cola."

Alice's assistant was a human volunteer, like most of the people in the building; Magi spent their duty hours in the field. From the Outbreak onwards, numerous groups had formed to support Magi with medical care and resources, or protect them and their families from mobs so they could hunt freely. As Billy had predicted, even normal humans couldn't keep live beside magic, Demons and impotent governments in the same way they always had. Now the Guardians employed analysts to collate Demon attacks, deployment, team dynamics, Magi performance, Grief cube reserves and areas of need, as well as PR officers, doctors, combat instructors and numerous Security. 'Collaborators' were a soft target for Anti-Magi attacks, and few Magi could ever be spared as guards.

"That old rumour about the Senshi assassinating criminals in secret is all over the net again," Alice glanced at the demonstrators, while reading off two other screens, "It was inevitable after Kamishiro hospitalised those Anti-Magi kidnappers last week. Our own PR department recommend imposing a fine on him." In return for keeping their country's Magi in line, Magi organisations like the Senshi had operational and judicial autonomy. Magi hunted Demons to live, so they were fined Grief Cubes rather than sent to jail.

"Alice... Kamishiro's girlfriend was abducted, because she was going out with a Puer Magi. If you tell people that, they should understand him."

"Hmph, thank you. I suppose even an assistant can have insights—"

"Hi!" Alice spilt her cola as a tallish, very beautiful Puella in green barged into the office and moved very close behind the assistant, "Well, Homura never told me you were so cute, Tatsuya-kun. Do you work here because only *magical* girls are enough for you, stud-muffin?"

"Um, I don't, I, er..." Tatsuya blushed heavily, while Alice went even redder with anger.

"Souma Mitsuko, unhand my assistant now, or I foresee an unpleasant fortune for you." Pouting, Mitsuko stood back, and told Kaname Tatsuya that Homura had arrived to meet with him.

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"Tatsuya." Only more beautiful than ever at thirty, Homura crossed her legs and faced him in an office downstairs, "Are you keeping in touch with Junko?"

"Yes, Akemi-San," Tatsuya met her eyes, "Mum's company's still doing well, and she's okay with me working here. You shouldn't worry about me either; most of the Magi fighting every day are teenagers."

"You have no magic, Tatsuya; this war is not your duty. Immerse yourself too far, and the consequences for your parents, Alice and me will be from your own choice."

"Ah, speaking of going too far, what was with that Souma-San? She seemed a bit..."

"...Friendly? She's the strongest melee fighter in Japan; she had a tough past, but she's completely reliable. That's all that matters for Demon hunting."

"Akemi-San, it's harsh to say that about a comrade. If you fight together, you should try to be close friends." Homura might have said something about what had happened to all her friends, if Tatsuya hadn't had his sister's eyes.

"What did you call me here to talk about?"

"Madoka. Kaname Madoka." Homura almost wept at the spoken name, "You've been a family friend since I was a baby, Akemi-San. Is there something you meant to tell me?"

Slower than she'd told Billy, Homura told Tatsuya his sister's story. "That's why I need to protect you," She finished, "I'm sorry I never said anything;

I've been disbelieved too many times."

"It's okay. I heard most of it from rumours already. And I can understand you not telling me, so I wouldn't get involved in this world. But I am involved.

Akemi-San, have you heard of the Church of Magic?"

Apart from the odd week off to be with Tatsuya, Homura had done nothing for the last fifteen years but hunt Demons. Tatsuya had to show her how to use his

Palmtop to find the Church's website, related news reports, and Holobook groups where tiny images of Puella testified how the church had transformed their lives and cleansed their Soul Gems. Homura noticed Chitose Yuma listed as a founder. She hadn't told the child about Madoka, but she'd told Kyouko.

Homura felt the old sickening, as the world slid from her control.

"You're not happy with this, Tatsuya?"

"It doesn't sound like you are, and I'm not." Face set, Tatsuya clicked up more holographic pages, "Yuma went along with this to help people, but she's a healer, not a politician. Other Magi are controlling the church's message; I asked Alice look into their pasts. Most of them have been in incidents where they injured humans, or put harvesting Grief Cubes over saving lives. They think Magi are the 'Chosen People' and ordinary humans are 'Muggles'—basically, defectives. Their own words."

"You don't understand. Kaname Madoka gave her life to bring the world hope.

A person or church which corrupted that could not exist!"

Homura saw Tatsuya blink back tears; she realised how much she'd exposed herself, and looked away.

"Akemi-San...I believe we're at a historic moment. The Avatar Magi ruling India aren't even hunting for themselves; they live off other Magi for Grief Cubes, and the Magi live off humans. Since the Change Movement founders passed on, Central Africa is almost worse; it's been called magical Apartheid.

I've talked to hundreds of people over the web, in both places. Everywhere else, there are hate crimes and ordinary crime by Magi, and the rate isn't going down—millions of Magi have normal conditions of poverty, frustration, and fear.

And ordinary humans are afraid of you themselves. It's no excuse for what they can do. But if the Church of Magic keeps preaching that only Magi are destined for heaven, and a human soul is worth less...fear and conflict would only ever increase. You've always fought to protect everyone, Akemi-San, but the next Magi generation might look at humans as less-than human, unless we do something now."

Behind her poker face, Homura burned with pride. Born twenty years earlier, Tatsuya would have been cramming for high school tests and watching anime at 16. In some ways, the revelation that teenagers fought Demons every night had changed assumptions just as Billy had hoped.

"If you'd wanted this Church of Magic banned, you'd have talked to Alice. You don't want me to eliminate them, for defiling Madoka's memory?"

"Yeesh, no...you looked too hopeful there, Akemi-san. We don't want martyrs, we want a real message. I want you to tell everyone what Madoka...what my sister gave her life for, yourself."

"I couldn't. I'm a soldier, not a...prophet. I've done too much wrong to inspire anyone, like her..."

"Akemi-San, tell her story, and look at your eyes in the mirror when. I nearly cried—but anyway, people would believe you now. Everyone would understand who my sister was. She even came to me when I was a baby—so I know she loved me, I mean she really loved. She wanted to save the Magi who give their lives to save innocent people themselves. And you said she

fought to save family, friends and normal strangers, over and over. A girl who cared so much, about so many Magi...must have cared for us as well. Akemi-San, did she...say anything to Mum, or Dad, before she went?"

"I don't know. She loved you, but she always had to save people—she had to save everyone. She even died for me—the very first time—when I was a weak, cowardly human. Tatsuya, I'm sorry..."

Homura ran at Tatsuya, and held him. He was weeping like he didn't know why, and she felt his tears on her hair. Her breathing was quickened when she finally pulled away.

Madison Square Garden, New York, 2027

As Homura stood back from the microphone, the first sound was her own sob, as Yuma hugged her. Magi all over the stadium released their breath. As

Homura moved carefully offstage, the microphone floated to Yuma, who chimed in hard;

"What can we do, sisters and brothers? For an ordinary magical schoolgirl who sacrificed her life to save you from torment, and every departed friend you loved?

We can use all our strength to protect the innocent, like our Madoka, and none to do harm! We must not give up our freedom, never give up our mission—to be hope itself to all humankind, with Our Lady's hope and glory in our hearts..."

Innocent, desperate since her childhood abuse for any hope she could believe in, Yuma had all the words. Homura let her speak, and the crowd of Magi reply.

Each of a thousand thoughtspoken prayers flew direct to the minds of every single Magi of the crowd, in a unique unity of silent praise. Hearing her old, lonely devotion dimly echoed in so many thoughtvoices at once was only

overwhelming to Homura. Yuma was weeping openly, but the dark Puella took her chance to slip out to the street.

"Ah'd sick around till the end, Miss Akemi. You shouldn't be afeared to answer these folks' questions, and settle their doubts."

"Shuddup, Tom. She just feels out of place."

Homura turned to Tom Jackson and her former comrade, Bridie Sullivan. The head of the 'Minutemen' U.S. Magi organisation, and the oldest, toughest Puella in the Western Hemisphere, were on a bench outside the stadium in their street clothes, smoking cigarettes.

"Why are you here, Sullivan-San?"

"Suppose I dropped off my daughter at your Happy-Clappy Church of Hope rally, an hour past. Thought I'd stay, in case those Anti-Magi bastards tried something, or even that other Magi church. Then I thought about going in meself. But I guess it's for sure I won't be."

"How is your daughter?"

"Jenny's a bloody treasure, no thanks to her parents. She ain't even a Magi, imagine that? Normal as anything, but she's working with some others on a huge painting of your Madoka for their first building. Did she look much like the Virgin Mary?"

"Maybe she did. I never met the Virgin Mary."

"Ha! Anyhow, we need a purpose to survive, but so do humans, and Jenny seems to feel your Madoka is hers. I'm glad of that—and I'll be bloody glad if she never becomes a Puella Magi. How can I even be her Ma, if I can't fight for her?"

"It's all I could ever do worth a damn."

"Miss Bridie...I think my Ma got beat to death by my Pap when I was four, so you ain't done so bad by fighting. Jenny always talks about her Ma, when

we go fishing at weekends."

"Don't go mentioning what she says about me." Head lowered, Bridie still clung to Tom's hand on her shoulder. Homura didn't feel misplaced, beside them in the moment; all of them were comrades and Magi. "What about you, Akemi? Not going back in there to break out your tambourine?"

"I'm glad that Madoka can give all these people hope; I'm sure that makes her happy," Homura stared up at the night sky, "But I don't think I'll ever share the joy of those children, until I see her face again."

"Well, you and Miss Chitose done a good thing," Tom told Homura. "Took long enough, but Magi need an identity, to keep independence."

"Independence?"

"You watch the news, Miss Akemi? Since the India war, government's been screaming for Magi Organisations to be under military command. Can you imagine? Humans ordering us to wipe out invading armies, occupy oil-rich states, or attack India before they make war on us? The Church of Hope is gonna stop that happening. It's gonna tell Magi to protect all humans from Demons, keep the freedom they got, and never harm humans of any country. I made sure with Tatsuya and Miss Chitose that your Madoka would want that.

First use I ever found for religion."

Tom met Homura's withering glare with a grin of nervous innocence. Bridie ruffled his dark hair and told Homura he was a rascal.

Homura had spent six months travelling as she hunted, to tell her story all over the world. Now, she meant to leave the Church of Hope to Yuma, find Mitsuko, and completely get back to her real work. As always, for Madoka.

Hamberg, Germany, 2028

If Magi violence, robbery and terrorism hadn't been a serious problem before the Outbreak (Graffiti such as the eye of Sauron on the

Montparnasse tower, and the battle frescoes half-way up Big Ben, were a related new phenomenon), it was because Contract Puella Magi shared enough idealism and conscience for acknowledged sin to drain their Soul Gems. The Outbreak had thrown the field open to people the Incubators would never have Contracted.

Arthur Jamison-Potter had absconded from Eton after Awakening, to use his exceptional new agility in the career of Gentleman Thief. Though his third bank robbery had led to two hostage deaths, he wouldn't have called himself a murderer; his Soul Gem was button-bright. One look at his messy hair and open face would show that he saw life as one big adventure.

Fleeing the UK with his boyfriend 'Bunny' Malloy, he'd thrown in with two other fugitive Magi, Ellen Azuma and Will Casper. Hearing a rumour from Casper about a secret lab near Hamburg developing a Grief Cube amplifier, Peter had conceived the idea of stealing it. He'd talked of blackmailing the UK

Ministry of Magic and EU *ministère de l'occulte* into pardoning them all, but planning had never been his thing—it wasn't as if he felt there was any purpose to his life.

"Look here, Muggle," He addressed one of four scientists held at weaponpoint by his colleagues, "These notes appear to describe some sort of drug. What exactly is its purpose?"

Several apes stared mournfully from an adjacent holding lab, while rats crawled

round a cage on the bench. Malloy flinched from them distastefully, while digging his foil into the head researcher's throat. The German scientist stared at the other weapons, and weighed his options.

"A vaccine. To cure the magic."

"Of all the nerve..." Arthur nodded to Ellen, who knocked the man down without comment. Casper, a skinny, silent teenager in green with a dull expression, corralled the other scientists with his bow.

"It wouldn't destroy your powers!" Another scientist protested, "We have *ministère de l'occulte* funding! It's to stop children transforming and give them some choice between Magi or human. There are many side effects in animal test—truthfully, it kills the imagination, even the reasoning for two years duration. But in two years more it will work; to save humanity, it must!"

"Probably worth something to those jumped-up oiks at the Ministry of Magic, then. William, Alexander, collect all the samples and notes. Bunny, if you'd take charge of our prisoners. We'll need them once the police arrive." Malloy looked somewhat mutinous at this lenience; his soul Gem was almost entirely black, but it was somehow visible at a glance that he simply didn't care. The same was true in a different way for Ellen, a delicate East-Asian girl brought to the UK by human traffickers. Her expression resembled the most hopeless of the caged apes.

"I told you, love, the bank job in London was a balls-up. We won't be just bumping Muggles off, unless it becomes necessary."

"Sir? What about t' animals?"

"Don't be a damn-fool, William. We're not the RSPCA." A monkey growled from its cage. Peter turned in mock surprise, and gave a little wave to the animal with his familiar grin. Then he turned back to Will, who put an arrow through his Soul Gem.

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Malloy screamed. Face remaining quite still, Will ducked under the rapier, and shot him point-blank. Ellen thrust her sword at him, in silence; after an inhumanly fast struggle that smashed several instruments, a kick laid her out across a bench.

Before the senior researcher's could get up, another arrow burst his head. Eyes flicking around the lab, Will quickly piled up the records and samples related to the vaccine in a sink and ignited them.

"It's alright, girls," he whispered, as the dogs whined at his back, "I'm here to save tha, so don't be scared. They didn't...hurt thee bad, did they?" Will had Wished to talk with animals; as the dogs barked their replies, his face hardened.

" *Bitte*, don't hurt us!" A younger scientist got out, "It's crazy that you use your powers like this. You're supposed to save people!"

" *Who* do tha say I'm supposed to save, bastard?" Will quickly released the mice and apes, but a dark figure burst in before he turned back to the researchers.

"Ayeup, tha's a bit early."

"Drop the bow and give me your Soul Gem, Casper. I'm arresting you as a *ministère* Agent, seconded to the Federal Criminal Police. Who have surrounded this building, with other Magi Agents."

"David Burowski, as I live an' breath?" A grin finally split Will's small, hawk-steady face. The three hostages shifted fearfully between the Magi, as the young man in the white mask and black waistcoat edged towards his target. At Will's instruction, the apes and mice gathered behind him. "Why t' hell did Magi ever become coppers?"

"When Magi became worthless criminals. Though my idealism makes me useless for anything else, according to Madam Victorique. Lower your weapon, and let the hostages go, if you have any hope of redemption."

"Ayeup, did I do something wrong? Both t' homos were stone-cold killers. T'

kraut egghead; he'd have made more of that bloody vaccine I come here to bury.

And they all deserve worse, for torturing innocent creatures. Don't tha understand?"

David knew Will had shot guards and staff at Huntingdon Life Sciences, before releasing their lab animals and burning the site down. The GSK Stockton Park site case had been even worse. Only Will's stolid front had allowed Jamison-Potter to think he had masterminding this heist, rather than the most dangerous Animal Rights terrorist in the world.

"I understand your urge to protect animals, Caspar. I have a dog myself and love him very much. But I must admit that I care more about my wife, and I care about these people. Because human life is precious— *if* it can still do good."

"Pull t' other one. Life ain't worth a dog's shit, t' way these Muggles live it.

Caged themselves in schools, labs, or parliaments, always hurtin' an' never feelin'. Knew animals were better, even 'afore I could hear their pain, happiness—

and always their *pride*. They know who they are and what real life is; t' only law they need is law of t' jungle." Will jerked his head at the burned papers, the dead Magi, "Just like us. That's why I came here to burn that bloody vaccine, tha know? T' Muggles should go away, not Magi. We fight for our lives every day, with strength we never even knew. Tha can't say muggles are alive, like me and thee, or this little 'un." A lab mouse had run up to Billy's shoulder. He smiled at it with heroic resolve.

David wished her could stop Will talking. His plain face wasn't animated by a sadist's leer, or insane despair. He spoke in earnest, sincerely trying to convey a wonderful truth. It was his body that moved like something from the forests, an unreachable predator always in his element. David edged forward, talking to stop Will watching his hands.

"Is tricking and killing men, but sparing women, something any animal would do, William?" Glanced at Ellen's unconscious body, Will bit his lip, "We may carry our souls in glass, but we're humans—" Wires flew from David's hands as Will fired, tugging his bow aside, and pulling the three hostages back to the door behind him. "—not superheroes."

Will jumped back as he summoned another bow, but a net of wires was coming

up from behind. He managed one wild shot, before the net went tight.

Incredibly, Will shifted aside and ducked from the encircling trap. David realised that a single wire had been cut by the arrow, loosening his entire web.

He ducked behind a bench, as Will fired a volley at him before reaching a window and crashing through.

A din of gunfire followed, from the police and Magi Agents outside. David was about to rush to the window himself—instead, he pushed the hostages towards a door covered by police, and ran back into the lab building. He caught up with Will and the apes he'd released, near the fire exit.

"Your Wish was to talk with animals," he gasped, flinging a noose around Will's bow arm, and pulling him in, "You must have learnt illusion magic since, but the lies end here." His grey eyes were calm as he forced Will down—

the Yorkshire boy got some stinging kicks in, but David was stronger. "Your Soul Gem will be surrendered to a Penal Unit leader, and you'll surrender the Grief Cubes you collect with him, until you've settled your debt. You're a murderer, but a strong Magi—you'll survive."

"Tha ain't telling me nothing, Big Dave. I'm me; this is what I am."

David was stronger than the two apes that leapt on him, but didn't want to risk hurting them. In the struggle, Will twisted away from him. An ordinary Walther was in his hand, and he was slipping through the fire exit.

"He was almost crying," David told his wife Maria later, "With frustration that the animals had been recaptured while saving him."

"So he wasn't a completely bad child?" Maria asked.

David smiled at her indulgently, and squeezed her shoulders. That evening, he told Victorique De Blois, the *ministère de l'occulte* head, that he wanted personal responsibility for hunting William Casper down.

Tokyo, Japan, 2030

Tatsuya thought he would always remember he'd been watching *Cardcaptor Sakura*, when he heard Yuma Chitose had been shot.

A month before, India had invaded Afghanistan to suppress terrorist Muslim organisations. The U.S. and China had called the invasion illegal, but could palpably only respond to a Magi army with other Magi or nuclear weapons.

And the single response of all Magi organisations and the Church of Hope was that they would not fight humans or Magi in battle; their duty was to hunt Demons. Crime by Magi had fallen steadily since the church's beginning.

Attacks against Magi, from stone-throwing to bombs, rocketed following the statements.

Yuma had taken a fortnight off hunting entirely; she spoke all over Europe, America and Russia, begging her believers to pray for peace and not answer violence in kind. Several Magi worldwide knelt down in public places, and simply prayed their hope and despair to Madoka until their Soul Gems were drained.

Then three Indian Puella Magi had walked into the new Cathedral of Hope in Canterbury, London, and put a bullet in her before the congregation had killed them. The Indians hadn't spoken or shown a single expression, like genuine zombies. Victoria De Blois' investigators quickly uncovered an unknown drug in all of their bloodstreams. Whether the Magi Tatsuya knew on the web blamed Islamic terrorists or a CIA conspiracy, drugs and brainwashing were a muggle tool, their worst nightmare. As the U.S. indicated that it would protect its Middle East interests with force if India did not withdraw in a week, Francoise Oscarina Jarjays of France and the

UK's Integra Wingates announced a private Holonet conference between Magi leaders. Alice had phoned Tatsuya the minute it was over.

"No one thinks the Indians wounded Chitose; their enemies aren't Magi. But they apparently can't afford to back off Afghanistan, even it means war. Our relationship to humans might be about to change, Tatsuya."

"I don't understand."

"Jarjays, Wingates and the Indians feel that we can only protect humanity and ourselves by a revolution to remove humans from power. The Incubators will back anything that prevents nuclear war. The Russia and Israeli Magi already forced government changes right after the Outbreak. The Africans and Arabs simply want a chance for global wealth redistribution and to prove that Magi really are the master race. There's going to be a wider Holonet conference tomorrow. After that, all military and material resources are going to be seized, and governments deposed, supposedly. In actuality, there'll be a civil war with the U.S. Magi and half the Church of Hope, then a Magi-human war. Then the Demons will eat up the remains."

Tatsuya could feel the world slide as Alice spoke. Since he'd been a toddler, and his sister had smiled beside him, life beside Magical Girl's had been the only one he could imagine.

"Alice, what about you? What about Homura?"

"Homura, as ever, cannot be contacted. I've searched worldwide missing child records on the net, and may have a lead that could solve this idiocy, but you are *not* getting involved. You'll be safer in the Magical Senshi HQ than at home, but don't even come up to my office."

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Kaname Tatsuya didn't believe he'd ever wanted to live a peaceful life. He'd trained in kickboxing since he was five, and used it to defend himself and his co-workers more times than he could count. To live beside Magical

Girls like Alice, Mitsuko and Homura, he had to use the strength he had, as they did.

He'd biked to Toyosu, gone up to Alice's room, and seen her lying beside two dying Magi, blue dress and knee-socks stained with blood. Two more Puella—

Caucasians, not Indians—stood over her with empty eyes.

Tetsuya hesitated—then he flung a chair at the furthest Zombie and lunged at the other with a step-through kick. She threw him against the wall, aimed her revolver—Alice's staff batted it from her hand. The second Zombie stepped towards Tatsuya, as he snatched up the fallen gun and aimed it.

The Magical Girl had round eyes, as dark as his. There was no feeling or humanity in them—but she was as old as he was. An age seemed to pass as Tatsuya realised he couldn't shoot her, and the Zombie raised her dagger.

An arrow smashed through the window and the Zombie's Soul Gem. Homura rolled in through the frame, wings vanishing as she flicked her hair back.

"Akemi-San? You saved me. You killed her..."

"It wasn't my first time." Her voice was calm, her breaths tight, "I will protect you, so don't be reckless."

"Just don't kill this one!" Alice had got her staff round the last Zombie's neck and choked her out, "We need her alive."

"Alice! You need a healer—what do you mean—?"

"Victorique De Blois will be arriving from Europe tomorrow," Alice sank back onto her bed, panting, "She will use her gift of Psychomancy to discover where these wretches came from. Tetsuya, you're bleeding—"

"De Blois happens to be arriving tomorrow?" Homura's eyes were cold, "What's this about, Alice?"

"A truth we must discover," The pale little Magi lowered her eyes, "I foresaw this attack yesterday—but guarding myself obviously would have deterred them, and their mystery would have remained. I didn't want you to come up here, Tatsuya—but I knew Homura was in Japan, and would be watching you. I'm so sorry."

Kneeling, Tatsuya hugged Alice deeply.

"I'm glad to be used by you, Alice. You're the bravest, cutest Puella I know."

"Tatsuya..."

Alice clung to his chest. Finally, he looked up at Homura, and sheepishly thanked her for saving him.

"For Madoka. I have to protect you." Homura looked away from Tatsuya and Alice.

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The doll-like Italian Puella with silver hair sucked on her pipe, and ran a lace-covered hand over the unconscious Zombie's brow. Homura, Tatsuya and the bandaged Alice waited for her to speak.

"This girl...is a monster created by humans. Not Islamicists or Americans, but Japanese. She was probably procured from Eastern Europe shortly after the Outbreak and raised in a lab virtually from birth. She's never fought Demons; she was sent out to kill Alice soon after transforming."

Homura looked down at the Zombie Puella. She was a European, with masses of brown hair. Her eyes had been dull and utterly fixed on a single end—she had certainly looked worse than Homura had ever felt.

"No..." Tatsuya's mind recoiled, "How could she become a Magi? Magic comes from feelings, right?"

"She has feelings. The drugs and conditioning simply focused them all on completing her orders. The Zombie Masters probably confined many more girls to acquire as many as seven Magi as well. For Uncontracted Magi, our Wish is subconscious, at the moment of transformation. Most them must have Wished for their friend to be alive again, to be free from their prison, or for the world to stop existing—weak, subjective Wishes that only granted them illusions. This girl was stronger than that; even brainwashed past humanity, she Wished to survive, and she has. Her name is Altena."

"She couldn't have come to Tokyo alone," Homura broke the silence, "Where are the ones who did this to her?"

"Who are they?" Alice whispered, "What is their aim?"

"I couldn't tell from her memories. Before the attack, these ones stayed in a flat in Roppungi with two human handlers; I could only pick up the rough area."

"I'll call a team back from Demon hunting," Alice offered.

"What was done to this girl by humans mustn't leave this room," Victorique responded, "If we've to have a chance of preventing that absurd revolution against humanity everyone is currently rushing towards. You're hurt, Alice-San; support Akami-San from here in finding the Roppungi flat. I'll call through to the Holonet conference on the revolution, and stall for time."

"The people who did that to her *weren't* humans." The three Puella stared at Tatsuya, on his knees beside Altena, "Humans aren't like that. Is there anything I can do? Do you even trust me, since I'm a muggle..."

Homura embraced him for the second time in her life.

"Tatsuya...you're my friend. My only friend in this world. We're the ones who've sold our Souls for the strength to protect you. So stay here with Alice in Victorique, and let us."

Alice clung to Tatsuya's sleeve earnestly, eyes wide. Victorique smiled faintly; Tatsuya remembered her husband was a Japanese human.

The phone in his pocket suddenly rang. He read the e-mail.

"Homura...who's Billy Kane?"

Haiti, same time, 2030

Phone in hand, Billy sat on a wicker chair in a beach house, surrounded by stacks of books. Facing him was a dark-skinned woman more beautiful than the sunset, with wings of pure darkness and strange depths.

"I presume you just sent your findings to Akemi Homura, but I can't imagine what you expect to come of it. You may have proof that the Zombie Magi were

acquired and prepared by the secret branch of a Japanese Corporation, and that the project was officially terminated when the American military refused to buy them. But I left no trace when I manipulated the project directors into those attacks. Even the Incubators have no idea that I exist. The Magi will still charge humans with another atrocity, and the last war will begin tomorrow. The nightmare of human existence will end."

Billy chuckled. Since Sarotov, when Pandora had helped him expose the Demon Princes and Magi, and even pushed him into becoming a Magi himself, she had taken him in without even using her voice of command, just by perfectly playing on his hopes. Now he had done everything he could for the world, as a limited creature, he could finally resist.

"Pandora. The Puella Magi who let every suffering out the box, and shut hope inside. Don't you want to tell me your story, before the end?"

"What would the point be? Suffering and useless hope can only die when all stories are finally ended." Billy looked into her torpid, merciless eyes and grinned.

"Well that isn't happening this week. All this history needs is a villain, or at least a better one than you. I sent Akemi-San proof of where your Zombies came from—and a video confession that they were sent and prepared by the

god of zombies. There won't be any Magi-human war if they believe the one behind everything was me."

Presidential Palace, Haiti, eight hours later

Homura flew with her own wings to the beach house in Haiti, and found Billy with every bone in his body crushed. She watched him silently pass on, and then went to the lock-up he'd mailed Tatsuya about, where all the documents she needed to prove his confession were hidden. Then she went to the only public Holonet interface on the island, and logged into the conference on world Magi revolution. She showed them the documents, and the video where Billy related, with convincingly demonic calm, how he had masterminded both

Zombie attacks, to push Magi into seizing control from the undeserving Muggles.

"I've already sent a message to Tokyo for them to raid the main facility in Kyoto, and arrest the humans involved, along with remaining Zombie Magi."

She finished, "But all the human child-traffickers, scientists and businessmen involved in creating the Zombie Magi were only stooges, with no higher goal than receiving payment. There was no conspiracy, just Billy Kane."

"The man who caused the Outbreak?" Victorique's hologram helpfully reminded everyone, "If anyone could be capable of this..."

"...if any Magi were capable, it would be him. My God." Francois de Jarjays'

blonde curls glowed as her hologram slumped like a weary lion, "If Chitose's shooting was not masterminded by humans I cannot countenance our plans to depose them any further."

"Perhaps you've forgotten that humans are about to start a nuclear war over the Afghanistan crisis." Integra Wingates glowered through virtual cigar

smoke,

"Seizing control from them is necessary for their survival and ours."

–Very well put– the telepathic Kyubey's message was naturally text rather than sound, *–I can't see that Akemi Homura's information changes anything–*

As Tom, Francoise and the still wounded Yuma responded at once, and all the holograms started shouting, Homura removed the Holo-visor from her eyes.

Bridie Sullivan was behind her, breathing hard, phone in her hand.

"The bastard's dead isn't he? What happened?" Homura told her. Without a word, Bridie held her phone up.

Angel, I'm sorry–tell the kid I was. My Wish was that you would get another chance. Since that night, it's been all I've wanted. Billy

"The eejit. The bloody, selfish eeejit. He lives for all these huge causes, knocks the whole world sideways, and makes a pathetic Wish like that... only a man could be that daft, you know? He could've tried. We could've tried again..."

Bridie slumped down on a bench, hand in her red hair–Homura realised the woman's Soul Gem was black. She grabbed the Irish Puella's fading hand and spoke rapidly.

"Sullivan-San, Billy was nothing like Madoka, but he sacrificed himself to stop a war, by playing a villain. You're the only one who's going to remember him as a human. You can keep living with that purpose–no, whatever purpose you think right–because of his Wish."

Bridie didn't answer, but the darkness miraculous receded from her Soul Gem.

She leaned back and smiled at Homura peacefully.

"I saw her—your Madoka. She was Looking at you like she really loves you."

Then Bridie stood, and took the Holonet visor from Homura's hand.

"The spread of magic proves that Magi are the natural form of *homo sapiens*,"

An African Puer was pronouncing, "It's natural that we should rule over corrupt, shiftless Muggles as a superior race!"

"Tell me, love, why the fuck would you be better at running the world than any human? Humans can be bastards, but Magi can be the biggest fucking stupid bastards in the world—"

Homura turned away, tired, but somehow light hearted. Whatever the conference decided, the U.S.-India nuclear war still looked very probable. She wanted to see Tatsuya, even if it was one last time.

Magical Senshi HQ , Tokyo, Japan, same day

When Homura got back to the Senshi HQ, Victorique was curled up on a chair in the lobby, staring at her pipe. She gazed at Homura like a sad doll.

"Has the facility in Kyoto been secured yet?"

"A team reached it a few minutes ago. Every human in the place, and all the remaining Zombie Magi, had been cut to tiny pieces."

"Someone got there first? Who knew?"

"Akemi-San, its Tatsuya...you should go to the medical area."

Homura ran. Pushed her way into a glass room, where the raging fog in her mind broke into a storm.

Tatsuya's chest had been laid open by a bladed weapon. He would have died in seconds without the healing Puella beside him; Homura saw him look up at her. She stepped towards the bed, and collapsed.

"Its okay, Akemi-san. You shouldn't worry..."

"Madoka. Madoka, *Tatsuya*...I couldn't protect you, I tried...." The healer was praying with her. Tatsuya smiled through a human's undimmed pain.

"It was my fault. Alice was trying to find the Zombie Magi's flat in Roppungi. I wanted to help...so I went out, and rang Mitsuko.

"Alice helped us find the flat...the human handlers were still there. I shouldn't have gone after Mitsuko, but I thought she could be in trouble...I didn't want to leave her alone."

"Tatsuya...Mitsuko...?"

"I'd told her what had happened to those girls. There were only two humans in there...and she was torturing them....cutting off tiny pieces. I must have gone crazy. I told her she was better than them, that magical girls didn't do such things; I said I wouldn't report her if she stopped, but she..."

"Mitsuko did this to you?"

"Akemi-San, you've got to help her...I know she just suffered too much and broke inside..."

"That's the story of a Puella Magi. Only some of us...do things beyond forgiveness. I'm so sorry, Tatsuya. You should have grown up, and become a

hero, and told Alice you liked her...!"

"Ah...I never did. It never seemed right...since you were always protecting me."

He smiled up at her broken face, "...Healer-san, you shouldn't waste more magic on me, if it's no good." The girl was openly weeping; she looked about thirteen.

"I'm sorry, Akemi-Sama, I can't help him..."

"Yuma could heal it. I'll fly you to Europe..."

"Homura-San...it's cool you try so hard, you know? You've always been a real friend." Homura gripped Tatsuya's hand as he reached out, "Will I see Madoka again? I always hoped." Homura stared helplessly at Madoka's little brother, and had to tell him, she didn't know if he'd see her. A last pain twisted his face,

"Mother...I'm sorry."

Homura had never seen Magi die without a smile, Since Madoka's Wish, but pain and fear clouded Tatsuya's young face like dirt. All the pain of her life crashed down again, as she watched him die. She sunk down beside him like a prisoner losing every hope of escape. The healer was weeping hysterically; before Homura stood up, she had passed on.

Madoka had come for the healer's soul and passed her by—Homura shivered uncontrollably. Her love strained hellishly against the sight of her failure. The certainty that she would never hear Madoka's voice or look on her eyes again without this guilt hurling her from heaven again and forever.

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"There's a global warrant out for Mitsuko Souma's arrest." Victorique told Homura outside, "It turns out that she was close to a great many mysterious deaths of child abusers and rapists in the past two years; Alice showed me all the files."

"Mitsuko's Soul Gem never darkened without a reason...she never showed..."

"Then she was a psychopath, who even hid it from you."

"Tatsuya's parents. Didn't you call them?"

"We've got enough problems now without admitting that a senior Magical Senshi has been killing humans for years. We're going to pin Tatsuya's

death on Anti-Magi. That was Alice's last order. She passed on before you arrived; without Tatsuya she was never going to last the night."

Victorique's childish face radiated weariness. Before Homura could answer her, a phone started ringing. Then another, in Alice's office.

"Four Demon Princes appeared five minutes ago. And something in Tehran, even bigger. It's wiped out everything...as far as *Karaj*. There was no build-up of miasma, no warning at all."

"Five minutes? Blois-San, what time *exactly*?"

Victorique told her. The Demon Princes had appeared within a minute of Tatsuya's death.

"Akemi," Homura could see Victorique's famous intellect spinning, "You say your Madoka can move throughout all dimensions? That she will become what you call a Witch, big enough to eat the world, and slay herself first? That these Witches had servants, *Familiars*?"

"That's right." Homura didn't want to keep thinking.

"Then the mystery of Demons is solved. They are the Familiars of Kremchild Gretchen, the world-eating Witch, sent back in time from her. As Magi numbers grow, your Madoka absorbs more Grief, her Witch grows bigger, and the Demons more numerous. But these five Demons are her very own grief, at the murder of her little brother. The curse of her Witch on the world."

"Madoka...no. She didn't want this..."

Homura fell to her knees. With her hope stripped away, she was as powerless

and pathetic as she'd always been. She felt she was going to stay in place until Madoka shattered the world—then looked up at Victorique. In her soft, determined face and shining eyes, Homura could almost see Madoka herself.

"Well, if your goddess doesn't want this, aren't you going to stop it? Aren't you going to get up?"

Florida, U.S.A., 2030

Akemi Homura and Victorique De Blois were going to kill the Demon Prince in Minsk; the Indian Magi were going to at least hold back the one in Calcutta.

Francoise Jarjays and Integra Wingates were going to Prague, Bridie was going to Iran with almost everyone else. And Tom Jackson was looking towards the ruins of Miami. A white mass brooded above the centre, shimmering with magical strength and ready to move. A few hundred Magi of varied strengths were all Tom had been able to pull from across the U.S. without inviting a Demon massacre anywhere else; even in a war situation, the Magi were a thin line. The youngest Peur was eleven, but Tom could find nothing in their faces to justify leaving anyone behind.

"Must be packs of Demons down there; more than we've ever seen. Just about none of you ever chose to be Magi..."

"Shut up Tom," River told him bluntly, "We chose to be here."

"That you did. I'm just glad I can fight by so many of you at once." Tom's gaze finally settled on a brown skinned teenager with a red dress and a spear. "Jenny Sullivan...your mother's gonna rip my nuts off if I don't tell you this ain't the place..."

"Then tell me, so I can ignore you and we can get on with this," Bridie's daughter responded, "And you can't tell me this isn't my place. I Contracted."

"With...the Incubators?" Tom nearly choked on his cigar, "We never went on a single fishing trip since you were a kid, you didn't wish to me your parents had been normal and magic never existed!"

"I might have been happier knowing my dad, or really knowing my Mom,"

Jenny responded, "And I felt glad when I never transformed by myself. I guess I wanted to choose my life, instead of just following my parents, you know?"

Mom wasn't the best; in fact she was probably the worst. But I know she did her best all the time. I'm going to tell her, when I get back."

"You don't mean to take any unwarranted risks, then?"

"No, I'm going to survive because I Wished to meet the guy I love, live with him until we die, and have lots of happy children. With my parents, what did you think it was going to be? And it isn't any of you dorks, so don't ask."

Tom laughed more freely than he could remember—and he had Wished to live freely—in fourteen years of politics. The Magi set off towards Miami.

Prague, Czech Republic, 2030

Even after the Demon Prince had been defeated, the refugees hadn't begun to return to the ruins. As a grey wolfhound trotted over a street dusted with brick, Will Casper grinned like a little boy.

"I said I was going to arrest you after this battle," David was leaning against a wall beside him, breathing just as hard, "You're still an insane, evil murderer, but you fought to protect the people here to the end. You surprised me."

"Guess we're all animals, tha could say, Big Dave, all but the bloody Demons.

Did tha finally decide to act like a Peur Magi too?"

"I'll admit it; all I've really ever wanted to do is protect Maria. I even became an Agent so humans would look at Magi and their families better. But I came here because protecting everyone is our duty. I just didn't mean to get killed doing it."

A Miasma big enough for twenty Demons was drifting down the street behind them. Both Will and David's Soul Gems were very nearly dry, and they knew there were human refugees nearby.

"Ayeup. I'm staying here anyway, so how about sitting this one out, Big Dave?"

You don't want your Missus to be sad, right?"

"No. I have to arrest you, or see you die. Or you'll escape and kill more people.

I'm not doing the wrong thing. She'll understand..." David shut his eyes.

Will's look was almost pitying.

"Maybe I lied sometimes, Big Dave, but I'm not ever gonna run from Demons.

That's me nature, that's our natural enemy, and this is t' final battle. This is *Ragnarok*. Do tha think I'm gonna to run away?"

Homura's face had never been stiller than David's; Sayaka's heart had never grappled with more poisonous absolutes. Like Homura (whose distance from Sayaka wasn't as great as sometimes believed), he might have passed away rather than move from his spot, if love for a single person hadn't drawn out his darkness into a bitter path of hope.

"You're...a murderer, William. You shouldn't be doing this. I don't understand."

"Yeah, I killed some people, and me Soul Gem never darkened from it for years.

Except for t' last time, when it did" Will stared at David with a hawk's harsh pride, "Turned out I was human after all. You never got me, Big Dave. But you're still the best copper I ever had after me. Ta for everything."

As David ran, Will Casper walked into the Miasma, firing his bow with all the strength left in him.

Kermanshah, Iran, 2030, days later

Yuma could see the whole battle from the support and observation post on a jagged ridge. The ancient city had been virtually ground to a plain, as thousands of Magi, ten times as many Demons and the Demon King came together. Waves of arrows flashed in the fog like an aurora blazing over the earth. Volleys of musket fire roared over the wordless battle-cries of the Magi, which blended into a chorus of injured groans leading all the way back to the

healers and clairvoyants.

"Ma'am, there are surviving Muggles from the city, trying to escape! They look injured, but we're barely healing up the Magi from the battle."

"We have to try to save everyone!" Yuma barely looked up from the Russian girl whose arm she was reattaching. "Get some of the reserve fighters to lead them here!"

In a common irony, Yuma had Wished to heal and protect, and passed her life among the pain she'd hoped to escape. Still, the ripped limbs and scalps of these children were without malice or hate; the Demons' hunger was nothing much beside cigarette-burns on a child. There were so many people Yuma could look after. And even if her Wish hadn't saved Kyouko, with Madoka she would see her again.

On the battlefield, fast, bright shapes flashed over white ranks that tirelessly clawed them down. At the centre of the whirlpool, a blonde Frenchwoman swung a thin sword fifteen feet long, twisting like a whip to clear away fields of Demons. And a red haired spearwoman ploughed through towards the great white mass of the King with an unending roar.

They reminded Yuma of Kyouko; she could tell they'd both lost someone very dear. Of course, she'd lost Kyouko herself; but she'd never been brave enough to live so fiercely. Kyouko had told her Homura's story of Madoka

offhand while eating ramen, and claimed she didn't believe it. Days later, she had passed on in battle, and gone to find the truth for herself. While Yuma had kept living, always smiling and inspiring people, always saying today would be good and tomorrow better, always hoping with all her heart that Madoka was real. She was afraid that if she didn't believe, she would be unable to live; and after everything, she was still afraid to die.

Yuma could see Homura gliding above the battle on her wings, pouring arrows down, and knew for certain that her face would be calm. A tiny silver-haired girl in black was controlling a hundred freely moving curved knives that cut back an empty circle. As a huge Demon broke through and charged her, she leapt away

through the air. Yuma looked desperately back at her patient, as he groaned.

"Come on! Concentrate on closing the wound—!"

The Indian Puer tensed, groaned again, and passed away with a smile. Yuma prayed for Madoka to exist and take his spirit, rushing on to a Chinese Puella with guts unfolding into the dust.

The first sound that they ever made came from the army of demons, and the King rose to twice its height—white boiled away like fog, and she was black, with great claws, and eyes like the sun and moon. The face was a mask with two halves. Yuma watched Francois Oscarina Jarjays and Bridie Sullivan drive gigantic weapons into the monster's flanks, heard the Irish Puella Magi's final vicious song.

She looked away to her patient, a half-naked human boy with both legs crushed in a collapse. She couldn't remember how long she'd been healing, or how many people.

"Miss Puella ...are you going to save us all? Are we all going to live?"

"Yes, yes. They're killing the Demons out there...and we can find your parents.

I can heal you, I promise..."

"Miss? If I die, can you ask Madoka to take care of me? My Mum was a Christian, but I'm not sure I was that good...Madoka just seemed really nice."

"It's one God, dear, and he forgives—you're going to be alright—"

The warmth flowed from Yuma's small body, as the mist of prayer around the healing station covered her ears. All these Magical Children's lives held nothing but struggle and pain, but they had the hope of Kaname Madoka, because they trusted Chitose Yuma. She been hope to all Magi for three years; even humans looked for hope she didn't she know she possessed to give them. So many children, looking to a single woman. So little she could do for them—her Soul Gem was near depleted. It was the day she would die and she was alone, afraid.

How could she know that someone cared?

Releasing her last power in a burst of green light, Yuma completely restored the human boy's legs. She smiled, fell across him, and found out whether everything she had tried to believe was true.

Bangkok, Thailand, 2034

Bridie, Victorique and Françoise Oscarina all died in the battle of Kermanshah; Tom and Integra hung on another few years. Hundreds of thousands were killed following Tatsuya's death, but far less the near extinction a U.S.-India nuclear war or Magi revolution, and the associated Demon attacks would have entailed.

The events of 2030, ironically enough, forestalled both threats indefinitely. As Magi began to outnumber humans, governments scaled down, let them get on with saving the world.

Homura told Junko and Tomohisa Kaname everything; she said that their son had saved the world with his death, like his sister, and she was still going to kill the one who had done it.

Finally, she walked down a hallway in a seedy hotel, with an arrow notched.

She heard Japanese music, the *Esper Mami* theme tune, from an unlocked apartment. Sitting over a Caucasian man in a pool of blood, untransformed, Mitsuko was watching *Esper Mami* on Anyshow TV.

"Hey, partner. It's a real shame that perverts watch these shows, no? I loved them when I was tiny."

"That one was a paedophile?" Mitsuko nodded, "Tatsuya watched those shows too, and he wasn't." Under Homura's gaze, tears leaked down Mitsuko's face.

"...he would've told you about me. I know I shouldn't have killed him—I see his face every night—"

"No. You don't." Homura stared down as Mitsuko crawled to her feet with a twisted face, "If you had ever understood what you did, your Soul Gem would have darkened, years ago—"

The Soul Gem in Mitsuko's palm flashed out a blade. She slashed, leaping forward like a sprinter, teeth clenched—the unfolding wing of an angel knocked her through the wall.

Arrows thunked around her body, as Mitsuko rolled. The green dress and fancy jacket of a poison princess flashed up, and a sword long as a tree slashed through the remains of the wall. Homura ducked and dodged back as the ceiling collapsed. A swarm of arrows bit through the dust like bullets. Mitsuko flipped aside, and lunged back at Homura, who snapped round and fired another volley straight into her. Mitsuko slashed at her legs as she fell; Homura flipped away, barely leaned back from a stab that cut her cheek, then spun a back kick into Mitsuko's face. Rolling to her feet, Mitsuko fled back along the corridor toward the stairs, throwing her sword at Homura, who leaned back, overtook the Puella in green and wing-smashed her through the hallway window.

Her wings unfolded as she leapt straight after Mitsuko, ready to fill her with arrows as she fell through the air. She was shocked at how much the Beretta pointing up surprised her—the first bullet tore through her chest, two more hit her arm and wrist. Then she swept past Mitsuko with her wings, knocking the pistol away. Another sword appeared, but she caught it between her hands, and brought both wing into Mitsuko's neck. Their strength would have taken a human head off. Mitsuko dropped, leg snapping on the concrete. She staggered towards the Beretta, but Homura had landed on a car, pointing it down at her.

Mitsuko fell to her knees. The bustling street had already emptied completely.

"Why do you have to hurt me, Homura? We're partners..."

"I never knew you, Souma Mitsuko," Homura stated, "You're a sinner beyond forgiveness, who murdered an innocent boy. You were too weak to bear the burden of magic."

"I was weak? Whatever I was, I fought. I killed humans that didn't deserve to live; I never let them hurt us, and never gave in! My mother sold me to a pornographer when I was eleven. You can't tell me anything about sin, or suffering!"

"I believe I can," Homura gripped the Beretta, with eyes like cold fire, "Because Kaname Madoka died for girls like you. She will forgive you; you'll be with her forever. You never bore any burden, you don't even know right from wrong. But I know. I'm going to kill a girl Madoka loves and died for, when I promised never to kill her friends anymore. I couldn't protect her brother, I couldn't save her...when I kill you, I'll never be able to see my love again."

"Aw, *I* love you, Homura-chan. You're smoking hot, and the only person in the world as crazy as me. Yeah, all those years we hunted together, we never discussed this, did we? Your little fantasy religion is a pile of crap."

Homura couldn't speak.

"I mean, I get raped, hunted across the world and executed—then some little bimbo in a pink dress tells me it's all okay? How the hell does that make anything right? It's just a comfort to idiots like that boy Tatsuya, who keep pretending that hope exists. I *hate* that, I can't stand it. If I see your dear Madoka, I'll spit in her face and tell her she's useless—"

The pistol butt broke Mitsuko's cheek. Leapt down onto her, Homura swung again, splattering blood from her nose. In the hell before Madoka's Wish, she had killed Sayaka twelve times, Kyouko twice and Mami eight. She could see their faces in Mitsuko's—twisted reflections of Mami's grace, Kyouko's defiance, and even Sayaka's idealism. It was herself that Homura couldn't recognise any longer. Mitsuko was sobbing through her broken jaw—she had freely assumed the roles of soldier, seductress or psychopath as she had wished, but this broken child her real face. Asking why the world was so terrible—why everyone she met always hurt her.

Homura finally shot her Soul Gem out. Like Tatsuya, Mitsuko never smiled.

Nothing showed on the Puella's face as she passed on, but agony and defiance of heaven.

"Madoka...."

Homura was alone in the street, with nowhere left to go. There was nothing she could do to gain her redemption back—if Madoka's voice had spoken forgiveness

in her ears, she would have clapped hands on them in agony. Her Soul Gem was going dark.

She knew that Madoka lived. She knew that her kindness was enough to save every Magi—she had to protect them, in this decaying world, that was Madoka's Wish and power. Even if she despaired in herself beyond hope, she couldn't despair in Madoka's world. She would remain in it.

When Homura looked up, her wings were black and deeper than human despair, full of colours and shapes from Lovecraft. Her Soul Gem was

entirely dark, and pulsing with energy she somehow knew would never run out.

– *What exactly has happened, Akemi Homura?* – Homura stared at the Incubator wearily – *Now, you shouldn't still be expecting me to frisk my tail adorably and offer emotional support. You've been an adult for some time, though your body seems to have reverted to age 14 inexplicably. Akemi Homura?* –

Homura stared at her hand. More than physical change, sour smells and harsh noises were remarkably intense. She could even sense beyond all of it, in the most vestigial way, impressions from dimensions beyond human mentality.

She wasn't a Witch, or a spirit at Madoka's side, but the third form of humanity, beyond a Puella Magi. She would live in the world without Madoka forever, an Angel in an endless battle.

Homura walked away from Mitsuko's body, checking her Soul Gem for Demons.

Algonquin, Canada, 2100

Jenny Sullivan had been a strong Puella Magi, a good leader and beloved mother. She had made innumerable weak Magi strong, but left the world fundamentally unchanged. Altana, the surviving Zombie, recovered something of what had been taken from her, and lived a brief life, more satisfying than joyful.

Human civilisation, in the end, went quietly into obsolescence. Homura lived

on, without hope, but always with her work. Knowing that Demons came from Kremchild Gretchen didn't make hunting them much worse than shooting Witches. It felt a little good to kill Madoka's despair, she had no more need for Grief Cubes, but gave all she found to other Magi.

She had been travelling to hunt Demons around the small human community that had endured near Ottawa, and run across a hunting party from a local tribe.

They looked like a family, with blonde hair, pale skin, and huge claymore-like swords. If one of them hadn't been a Sensory Puella, Homura would have tried to evade them, in the end she let them persuade her to enjoy their hospitality, and followed through the woods to their camp. They passed in file over stone ridges pressed down under nets of pine roots, huge as the bared veins and bones of the earth. Distant clouds burned red above the vividly green pines, along the length of the horizon. At even a large river, the group hopped over without a pause.

The village was a large collection of sleeping huts or tents, and something over a hundred Puella Magi and human children drifting in groups between them—

excepting two elderly humans, no Magi were over twenty-five. Several Puer Magi were casting nets a short way upstream, looking a rather refined party in their tuxedos. Some Puellas in lacy, bare-armed dresses were tending a patch of herbs and vegetables.

Homura had seen more advanced settlements in Europe, but in the end Magi needed no transport, cellphones or clothing, and no medicine, food or shelter beyond the most basic. Computers, science and even politics had only been distractions, in the end, from their unending war for survival. The tribal structure had grown naturally out of the pre-Outbreak Magi social unit of the hunting party; Homura had arrived with the last of the tribe's several teams to return to camp that evening. After everyone had taken a minute to greet the visitor, the hunters went to embrace all the children and recount the day's battles to their spouses or lovers. Even if they had known Homura's mythical identity, eating dinner with their families, alive, was a ritual not to be set aside. Homura had a few peaceful hours to eat deer and fish soup with the leader and her wife, before she sat down with the whole tribe in the dusk.

The campfire was lit as the old human couple were guided into the circle. They were wearing ancient goretex blankets, and deerskin jerkins sewn

with love by the young Magi who stared at them with awe. The Puella leader stood up before everyone, spear in hand.

"The day is gone. The night is upon us. We remember the Wishes that have shaped our lives. We pray for our world, where balance and peace are dead. We will fight against the Demons who do not live, for the life of the forests, and the rivers and the humans. We remember our purpose, to protect the-muggles-who-do-not-fight, from the darkness."

The leader turned to the human couple, and threw her weapon at their feet; Homura joined the other Magi in placing down her bow. Almost looking fearful at the devotion around them, the old couple stuttered their gratitude. The Magi knelt, as two Puella began to play a drum and flute.

"Kaname Madoka has gone before us, through the forests and skies; she is with us, in the light of this circle. Kaname Madoka, you are the beauty of the victorious warrior, you are the light of our souls. Strengthen our hearts. Inspire our magic. Be our hope, so we may protect, before we pass on to you...."

The whole tribe were praying; Madoka's name buzzed in Homura's ears. After they had sung songs to her lost love that she had never heard, a Puer Magi stood up. A boy in his Hunting party had been beheaded by a Demon that morning; he didn't understand why his friend hadn't been faster. Another Puer's best friend had passed on a week ago; he still wasn't certain he was truly with Madoka. One Puella was afraid that she was burdening her party. Another prayed for the strength to support a younger Magi as she wanted to. All the Magi prayed as they passed around the Grief Cubes. That the darkness would recede and they would live.

The human couple circled the group, murmuring words of encouragement.

There were a few pockets of 20th century human civilisation, mostly delving into high-end physics for ways to send Demons back to their own dimension. In part of Asia, muggles were slaves. But through the West they were a holy people, reaching miraculous age without Grief Cubes, sacrosanct as sacred cows.

Homura couldn't help turning away when the leading Puella gave a respectful litany of thanks to the Incubators, as a grey cat appeared to consume their spent Grief Cubes and take a report of their battles that it would pass on to the other groups in the area. The global data-collation of the Organisations had ended for lack of time and human aid, since Magi had become 80% of a pre-industrial world population. No matter how passionate their efforts were, Magi fertility was very low. There were fewer humans every year, and the Demons just grew stronger.

Homura knew Madoka would recognise the world she'd died to save, and wondered what her lost love thought of it every night. It might have been part of the reason she wandered.

There was a sense in the circle that the serious matter had passed. The old human woman sat down, and started speaking. She told the Magi the stories of gods and heroes.

Tom Jackson, conciliator of races. Victorique De Blois, the Wellspring of Wisdom. Yuma, the apostle of hope. Casper, the trickster of the forests. Mama Bridie, the unyielding warrior with a woman's heart. Baron Kane, the promethean bringer of magic and death.

Two Puer and two Puella got up as the old woman spoke, and acted out Billy and Bridie's story. Homura wasn't entirely convinced that Billy had ritually sacrificed an Incubator to gain magic, and restore Bridie to life. Nor did she remember a love-triangle scenario where Tom had shot Billy for leaving the woman that he, Tom, loved, or an ending where Bridie held her dying lover and forgave him everything. But it made a better story than the truth, and none of them would've minded. Patterns and lights danced around the players as they moved, in shapes of armies, towers and unreal landscapes of heart. Darkness, bloodshed, sunrise. The players burned magic to inspire their comrades with hope.

Eve and Cain had been Magi—the oldest stories in the world. Homura wondered if all the old myths of gods and monsters were simply remembrances, from a past of unhidden Magic. Now demi-gods walked the earth again, as Billy had

dreamed. Even if they were fighting towards their final twilight.

A buzz of anticipation ran through the tribe as one. Two Puella Magi were alone in the circle. A tall, slim girl fallen to her knees with exertion; a short, baby-faced girl gazing up at the moon. On her journey through endless worlds and the labyrinths of despair, Akemi Homura had followed Kaname Madoka. Graciously perfect, nothing but strong; never shedding tears unless for universal suffering.

Never born for the world, or anything but sacrifice, an impeccable saviour.

Homura watched a Madoka and a Homura blunder through the greatest story ever told. The mythical image of a Witch's labyrinth blazed above the players, as 'Madoka' threw out one arm;

"You are blessed among women, Homura, you would give your life for a friend.

But I will never regret that I am magic, and never turn back. For I will not die, but live, until I may give my life to save everyone in this world."
Homura knew it hadn't been like that, but she couldn't look away.

"Everyone..." The Magi whispered, hugged their Soul Gems, prayed to Madoka for hope and certainty, "Come to us, Madoka..."

"Everyone..."

Homura's face remained frozen, but her heart leapt to her ears. She was staring at a faint imitation, but for the first time in twenty years the voice was real.

—0—

"Everyone...even if they're ever so troublesome, Homura-chan."

"Ma-Ma-Madoka...why...?"

"I said I'd always be with you, didn't I? You're still going through such awful things, and you never know when to rest—but you can hear me at

last!"

"Madoka. I did awful things—"

"Shush." Her voice had the depth and beauty of a galaxy, and the impulsive joy

of a girl. Homura made a purr in her throat, transfixed. "You're still so serious, Homura-chan, and still fighting, for such a long time. You are a true Angel.

That's probably how you could hear my voice when you finally listened! But I still want to be with you again, and thank you properly for everything, and show you heaven, and introduce you to everyone..."

"Is...Tatsuya...?"

"He isn't with me, Homura-chan, and I miss him too. But only Magi come here; humans go somewhere else. It's one of the reasons this place isn't so much like heaven these days..."

"Madoka! Not, Mitsuko..."

"Yes, she's really a problem child, isn't she? Her, that Billy Kane, and Will Caspar especially, but there are billions of children here now...and I just can't make all of them happy. I thought if I took away all the horrid things they'd suffered, they would be fine. But something in their Souls fought despair for all their lives, and won't even stop fighting now. They say they want freedom for its own sake, even it brings harm, and that I've just made a tame, safe prison that keeps them as sheltered children. And everyone's feeling anxious and suspicious; because there's really nowhere else they can go—it's dreadful, isn't it? I'm trying to save everyone, so that it can be worth all you've suffered, but I don't know anymore..."

"No! Madoka, you always try to save everyone, even fools who don't deserve to lick your feet! You're a goddess, you're always doing good, you can't suffer any more! I want to protect you right now....but I can't!"

"Homura-chan I'm so sorry! You've got so many troubles of your own, and I'm making you worried like an idiot. I just wanted to talk, and be with you, so much! Thanks for listening to all my silly worries."

In the firelit circle, 'Homura's' life had been saved flawlessly by 'Madoka', one last time. She was begging 'Madoka' not to leave her, and the answer was 'Get thee behind me'—players and audience were too caught up to notice Homura's tears.

"I'm really glad that people remember me, thanks again for that, Homura-chan."

"But they always get it wrong about you. You showed me how to fight and protect, Homura-chan. You showed me what love was."

Homura fingers dug into her brow. A thin sound escaped her; then she ran from the circle, and the tribe of Magi, fleeing and stumbling through the forest until she fell.

"Homura-chan! I could forgive Mitsuko. Do you think I even need to forgive my best friend?"

"Madoka...how can I go to you like this? Don't be concerned for me anymore!"

"I'm not good enough for you, I never was. I'm sorry! I know you could forgive me. But I can't forgive myself anything."

"So mean..." Sadness finally broke through Madoka's voice, *"It's so cruel. But when you do forgive yourself, Homura-chan, I'll be waiting. I'll wait for you forever."*

Homura lay under the dark pines, in silence. But not alone, whatever she was or felt, now or ever. The first real, tiny smile of twenty years crept over her lips.

Central Australia, 2115

Homura had seen the world end a hundred years ago. Kremchild Gretchen had ripped the atmosphere off the planet, as Madoka the goddess put an arrow through its mask. Maybe there was a more predictable universe where that would happen in a few thousand years; maybe Madoka had kept it from ever happening. But in this timeline, humanity wasn't even going to get that far.

Demons had come to equal Magi in strength, and outnumber them twentyfold; they still had no new weapon, just ferocity and toughness. The last adult human had died ten years ago, and the Magi everywhere had fought until their Soul Gems were empty, praying for Madoka to save their children and comrades.

Homura walked through the desert, like someone with all the time in the world.

Ranks of Demons were assembling before her, in the shadow of stormclouds above. Without humans to drain, they would attack Magi by instinct, and then possibly starve when she was gone

"You're not alone, Homura-chan. I'm always with you."

She smiled—couldn't keep from smiling at that voice, whatever her own soul felt. She stretched out her wings, unworldly and inhuman. She leapt up, darting into the clouds to send her arrows down.

A demon appeared beside her in the air—she wrapped one wing around the monster to crush it, the others scattered under a barrage of arrows. Lightning flashed down on a distant hill; Homura wondered if she would end like that as she fired and fired. Three more Demons materialised in mid-air, but she was ready, and filled them with arrows at point-blank range. They fell, as Homura drifted to earth, and kept walking.

— *Akemi Homura*— The white cat scuttled after her through the bush, running up onto her shoulders. Homura regarded it blandly.

"I still don't need to drain Grief Seeds to keep living; I've got nothing for you, Incubator. Shouldn't you be flying off to trouble some fresh world?"

–Oh, I'll always be around, Akemi Homura. For as long as humanity needs me–

"Really? Did you ever fulfil that Quota?"

–Twenty years ago, actually. The Quota was based on humans being wiped out by Demons or themselves within 400, rather than 300 years, of industrialisation. So we've done somewhat better than predicted– No trace of satisfaction was detectable in Kyubey's words, beyond his permanent natural aplomb. – However, the Quota was also based on the reasonable assumption of another world with magic-capable inhabitants being identified within 6000

years. Such a world has not been found, leaving us as far from permanently reversing entropy as ever–

"Good. Maybe after the world or the universe ends, I'll be able to see Madoka again."

– Homura, I've been accused of a one-track mind but you're something else–

"Kyubey, what do you really want? Is there something you'd do anything, or become another creature, to gain?"

–I only want to continue existing. To keep seeing, speaking, thinking myself, and for my barely-altered genetic material to endure in my race, forever. There is no other rational desire. I would do anything to continue living except, naturally, for giving up my life as an Incubator–'For there is no planning, knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, wither thou goest'. If we had chosen to be gods to humanity, rather than tempters, that would be our entire bible–

"Hmph. 'He who clings to his life will lose it; she who gives her life will keep it.' You might believe that intelligence and power make you gods, Incubator.

But without emotions and dreams, I'd say you're nothing but big-brained animals. Worms on the ground have the same desires as you."

—I've been called worse than that in 3000 years, Akemi Homura. I still haven't changed—

"I know. That's why you're pitiful."

Kyubey stared towards the place where Homura's Soul Gem was leading her.

—0—

Homura thought she could hear music—but she had heard stranger things in her life. There was a hut in the middle of the outback, and a boy with dark wings like her, and a violin. He was better than Kyouzuke—it was the most beautiful *Ave Maria* she had ever heard.

"That was your Wish, wasn't it? To play perfect music?" She stood before the house. David Burrowski stopped playing. Thunder sounded in the distance.

"It was good enough for Robert Johnson—and no one in history has ever made a perfect Wish."

"True. My Wish was probably foolish as well, objectively." Homura was expressionless, "But it seems we are still here, when everything else is dead."

"Since my parents went to God, and I played violin on the street to survive, I think the world has always seemed dead to me," David's grey eyes were as ancient and innocent as ever, "I think, even after seeing how wrong I'd been about good and evil, and having no one left to protect, I could accept this dead world because of a beauty greater than the world. I mean God, really, but music was part of it. So I am still here, despite regrets. Was it the same for you?"

"Somewhat." Homura looked down at a white bundle on David's lap. It was a baby, blissfully asleep. "Not yours?" David passed the child to Homura, who took it with a strange lurch in her chest. She had pale, slightly pinkish hair.

"Never, Maria was always sad about that. This girl's parents were Magi, who passed on a month ago. I took him out here, where there are the least Demons, but they surrounded the cabin, and cut us off. I could barely hold them back, but together, we could head back to the coast, find a safer place, with food—"

"Very well. I will protect him."

David followed Homura's gaze across the grey sands. A beautiful, dark-skinned woman with black wings had appeared, walking towards them.

"So. The last Angel. What are you here for?"

The woman smiled at them; the age in her eyes was incomparable to the other two, but her body seemed more awake with a bitter vitality.

"I am Pandora. And I'm here to finish wiping out the human race. Give that child to me."

Homura looked blankly at Pandora, and smiled. She gave a short laugh.

"Billy's papers said you were thousands of years old. You know everything that's known, and all you can think of is destroying the world. I'm not even interested in your story. You're more banal than the *Demons*."

"I am a human, the perfection of every quality in human nature. If my only solution to this irredeemably fouled-up world is to destroy it, has the history of human and Magi wishes achieved anything else?" Pandora threw out her arm, at the utter emptiness of the desert, "Look upon my works, ye mighty and despair."

Homura and David certainly felt it cause for despair, if all the love, genius, pain and sacrifice of history had ended in a desert. But they accepted

despair without turning from their path; that was the nature of an Angel.

"Have you ever loved anyone, at all?" David asked Pandora softly. She shrugged, suddenly girlish.

"I've tried it, it was nothing special. As for you...you'll see the girl you love again if I kill you, right?"

The words seeped through David's brain like honey and stopped it. He didn't move a muscle in the instant Pandora took to put an arm through his chest.

Without even dropping the baby, Homura kicked Pandora in the throat. The older Angel couldn't speak for a minute, but her black wings wrapped around Homura, ready to crush her to death, just as Billy had died. They strained for minutes—Pandora coughed, grinned and jumped back from another kick.

"Your Madoka will despair one day. All her suffering will be wasted."

It took all the limitless willpower Homura possessed to twist one wing in half and drive it into Pandora's face. Then she quickly put the baby down, sat across Pandora before she could rise, and crushed her between her wings to a thin paste. It took some time, and as her attention wavered at the end Kyubey moved quietly towards the wailing baby girl.

Homura finally dropped Pandora's remains, and stared around. David's violin

was lying in a pile of ash—Pandora's magical voice had pushed him off the pinnacle Angels occupied between humanity and despair. Homura hoped that he would reach Madoka's heaven, but remembered bitterly that he hadn't only been a Catholic, but his wife had been human. She could tell that the only heaven he would want was with his Maria.

"Kyubey!" Homura snatched the baby away from the Incubator on a sudden impulse. She coughed—and realised she was coughing blood.

—Akemi Homura. It seems you have a serious internal injury. Judging by David Burowski's case, you will not regenerate it, but despair and die. That child is the only remaining human in the universe. You can only protect it by giving it to me—

"So you can take her with you?"

—In all my time among humans I've never lied, Akemi Homura, and I will be entirely honest with you now. My superiors' plan is to clone that child, breed out the spontaneous Awakening of magic, and use them to populate an uninhabited world. They hope to eliminate free will in our new race of humans as well, and save them much pain and trouble—

"You idiot. Do you believe that humans without free will could ever develop magic?"

—After 3000 years dealing with the Wishes and dreams of humans—I must confess that I have serious doubts. But we don't know, that is the rationale of experimentation. Even if it's a desperate course, we have no other means but humans for eliminating entropy, I find my orders entirely reasonable. And don't you want your own species to survive, whatever form they must take?—

"No. Not as your tools and pets, suffering without even the dignity of our own Wishes. Madoka would hate that. No"

—In that case, I will have to wait for you to expire from your injuries. Your only other option, if you really want to keep that baby from me, doom the universe, and render the sacrifices of every Magi in history without meaning, is

to smother that infant now—

The white cat scuttled up on top of David's hut, and sat back on its haunches. It gazed mildly down at Homura like the little yellow god. An eternal force on the edge of existence, impregnable to human wishes and loves.

Homura gazed down at the baby, it had stopped crying. She felt true despair for its tiny life and humanity itself. She had done nothing good in her unbearably long battle, and the choice she made now would damn her all over again. She wanted to sleep, and have never existed.

"Help. Please." Despair was so heavy that she couldn't even speak her name.

"I'm with you, Homura-chan. I'm fighting with you. You'll be with me soon..."

"No. I'm sorry. I never deserved it. Not compared to this girl. You gave your life, Madoka. Shouldn't I do the same?"

Gently, she covered the baby's mouth with her own; the only kiss she'd given in her life.

Then Homura made a Wish. She Wished that the human child would go to be with Madoka, while she would become a human, with a human's fate after death. Whether it was white clouds, the life of an earthworm, or obliteration, she would never see Madoka again. That was her price for dying as a girl worth even an atom of Madoka's love.

As Kyubey saw the two lives before him go out, light blazed around them. A very familiar sensation swept over him; and then the last humans in the physical universe vanished from it.

—Directors, everybody, this is 9B. Akemi Homura killed the child. The project is hereby terminated—

For the next hour, the Incubators stationed on planet earth appeared before Kyubey one by one and thanked him politely for saving the universe, taking care of their sanity, ensuring their efforts had been fruitful, and fulfilling his

function in their race. 9B calculated that a sequence of the humans he had worked with would have taken incomparably longer, but it was still a while before he was left alone.

–Termination confirmed. All other Incubator units have returned to Station. You bear no responsibility for the counter-rational actions of Akemi Homura, 9B. You have done everything that was expected of you–
–Sirs. What else could I do?–

9B peered across the desert that rolled through ash to the horizon, under the night. However far he travelled, the golden barge of Cleopatra, Himiko's palace and the taste of Tomoe Mami's catfood would never be found. Everything of the humans he had lived among and worked with was gone. The mysterious ends of human magic would be mysterious forever. Whatever else their sacrifice had gained, 9B could realise, very coldly and undeniably, that the loss was not good in itself.

–What do you intend to do now, 9B? Survey, research and planning projects in the field of entropy reversal are ongoing. Your reconditioning into any new job you selected would be a matter of priority. Of course, you are due up to 50 years rest and relaxation, if you feel it would benefit your work–

–Directors...are you offering me a choice?– 9B whisked his tail for a moment, and stared up at the stars. ***–I'd like to remain on duty in my present function, Directors. I will download my consciousness from this body into sleep-storage, and remain asleep until a new magic-using species has been discovered. Then I wish to receive the necessary minor re-conditioning to make Contracts with that species, as I did with humanity–***

–That is an individual choice, but a logical one. As you wish–

Without fuss, the white cat's body collapsed over the roof. The wind blew over the remains of the last sentient creature on earth. More like a child's toy than a once-living creature, it still displayed the eternal grin of the skull.

Heaven.

"...you, poor little mermaid, have tried with your whole heart to do good deeds. You have suffered and endured and raised yourself to the spirit-world by striving for a hundred years; now you may obtain an immortal soul."

Homura had felt everything was being torn from her in strips as she died. Now her hair brushed strangely against her back in plaits; glasses pressed into her nose. She was wearing their old school uniform. She felt weak, oblivious, half-blind, nothing but human. Madoka was setting the book down, trotting through white space towards her. Offering a hand.

"Homura-chan. I missed you so much."

"M-m-m-Kaname-san, where...the baby...how...?"

Madoka pouted mildly and then quietened Homura with a smile.

"Angels weren't ever understood by the Incubators—even I don't understand how they can make their own Wishes. Pandora only really Wished to control humans rather than end them, and David never felt it right to use his Wish, but you did. Maybe you earned your second Wish through all your struggle and effort for a hundred years, or maybe I can call you the first real miracle, Homura-chan. But it means we're even! With a heart as big as Homura-chan's, your Wish could never just be for one human and one Puella Magi."

Pressing Homura's hand with divine gusto, Madoka swept her free arm across the horizon. Homura saw a stream of forms passing between a higher and lower place. Her eyes somehow picked out the baby she had died with. Billy waving his top hat at her, arm around Bridie's shoulder. Kyouko and Sayaka, David Burowski, Anne Frank, an African girl arm-in-arm with two African boys—more souls than anyone could count. The place they were going up to was something Homura couldn't look at. Nothing in the world could be as bright as the source of all brightness.

"Is that....God?"

"Yes. Or Buddha, or oneness with everything, or post-human consciousness.

That's where humans, and the parents, lovers and friends of Magi have been going from the beginning. But from now on, humans and Magi can go freely between that place and my heaven, because of your Wish. And we can be together even if you're a human again—you know, I never did anything here, but bring the poor souls home, and wait for you, Homura-chan. I always knew that any heaven I could make wouldn't ever really be heaven, without you."

"Kaname-san...Madoka, is it okay...? I—I'm so gloomy, I always mess up..."

"Homura-chan. Don't say those things again. We were already friends, and now we're going to be together for *always*."

With the simple words, and a smile as pure as lilies, Homura's pain and even her wisdom sloughed away. The regret and knowledge of uselessness she'd carried her whole life were gone, and a pigtailed schoolgirl squeezed Madoka's hand back. There was no care left, except for how the gigantic power in her heart could ever be expressed. She was loved and safe for always, and nothing would ever take her Madoka away again.

The goddess and the human girl walked up towards the source of light and goodness. Homura flinched away, suddenly worried that her human self would be transfigured in that place. Even if being born again was the only way heaven could be eternal, she just wanted to be Homura-chan, Madoka's friend, for at least a thousand years.

"Is it okay? Do we have to go now...?"

"Of course not. God seemed happy to make us as humans, with all sorts of funny ways, and even magic. Maybe the real reason that magic or the Incubators ever existed was to bring more people here, to heaven. What I mean is—He doesn't mind us taking the scenic route." Like a bird, Madoka kissed Homura gently on the nose, laughing at her surprise. The unspoilt

joy of the child in heaven shone in her eyes, as three people Homura knew came down from the light towards them.

"Homura-chan...I'd like you to meet my parents."

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